

Hanashobu

by 14Phantom

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Summary: Miyaki Ayame was just a half Oni living with her sister in the far North of Japan when she found two strangers retreating from battle. She stumbled upon a third man who might as well have been dead. She saved his life and he saves hers.

1. The man under the sakura

****Please review!****

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 1: The man under the sakura.

The turmoil of the fighting couldn't keep me from coming down and off the foot of the mountain.

I grew tired of temple life, though I'd never tell my sister who managed the land in place of Takeshi-sama. My little adventures were a break from the constant supervision of the holy grounds where nothing ever happened.

"Where are you going?"

I spun and gazed blankly at my older sister. Her long black hair shone against the waxing moon.

"Shouldn't you be staying on the temple grounds? Takeshi-sama wouldn't be impressed if he heard you left your post unattended." I doubted he would be. Nothing ever happened there anyways.

"I'm just taking a short walk around the perimeter. The boundary extends for some ways."

I nodded and continued, wondering how far I could go before she tugged me back and forced me to sleep some before the sun rose. That wasn't actually that far away now, the sky was already beginning to grow pale and the moon was becoming hazy.

"Ayame-chan, is there something you're looking for?" she inquired some time later.

"Sakura petals for fragrances; this is the perfect time of year to collect them and dry them."

She nodded. I couldn't have been more obvious in my lies. I hated the sakura petals.

The sun was just beginning to crest the hill behind us. Hinata-onee-sama opened her mouth, probably to call it a night (for me), when the cold silence was broken by a panicked voice.

"Hijikata-san!" she paused and huffed and I looked for the source.

I narrowed my eyes against the light rising over the hill and saw on a higher path the silhouette of a small woman, a much larger man leaning heavily on her. She collapsed and gently cradled him on her lap. Both were wearing Western clothing.

"Hijikata-san! Hold on, we'll be there soon!"

It sounded to me as though she were completely lost and about to lose herself in hysterics. Nee-san was already scurrying up the mossy hillside to help.

"Are you okay?" Nee-san asked. Obviously they weren't, the heavy scent of blood was already clogging my nose. I was surprised I hadn't noticed it earlier. The sakura were blowing about, which might have explained it.

The girl startled and held him protectively to her flat chest. The man's eyes opened a crescent and he murmured something too quiet for me to hear. He didn't look like he had much life left in him.

"It's okay," Nee-san cooed, holding her hands up slightly, displaying her defenseless form. Nee-san didn't need weapons anyways, not when I was around. "I want to help,"

The girl looked suspicious but it didn't suit her large, deer like eyes. She wanted to trust my sister, which was plainly apparent. I shrugged and kept walking. "I'll go find the other one." People didn't bloody themselves up that badly without help. I wondered which one was in worse shape.

Onee-san dipped her head in acknowledgement. I left them to their own devices then. They could get the man back by themselves and no doubt Onee-san could handle them both without my help. The man's wounds would be cleaned and dressed and the girl would be fed by the time I got back.

* * *

><p>I didn't intend to find the other man. I just wanted to take a

walk, but naturally when I wasn't actually looking I managed to stumble upon his still form.<p>

At first, I thought he was dead. That was the logical answer. The sword was clean through his chest, probably his heart too. If not, he definitely had a lung pierced and filled with blood. I bet he had drowned in his own blood.

Curiously, I approached him. I'd never seen a dead man before. His hair was golden like a flaxen field and matted in the dirt on the side he laid. The cherry blossoms were covering him like a blanket. His shredded Western clothing was hanging in tatters. He looked like something a controversial painter would have inspired.

I thought he might have been a foreigner. The hair would certainly be explained but on closer inspection his facial features were clearly Japanese. A half breed? I'd never seen one before now.

The petals on the ground next to his face stirred ever so slightly and I realized he was still breathing. Well, I thought to myself, what a tough bastard. I gently placed the palm of my hand against his shoulder, wondering how I would move him without killing him. His eyes fluttered open and I gasped, flinching away from him.

His eyes were blood red.

I didn't have such a good feeling about this. As quickly as he'd opened them, they shuttered, struggling to stay open, gazing at me emptily. Another moment passed and they closed, eye movement from behind his pale lids the only thing proving he was still conscious.

I checked my pockets for the medical supplies I normally kept on me. I had enough bandages and even a small container of a homemade remedy for wounds. The ground iris roots in the jelly substance would help ease his pain.

Carefully, I tore away the purple coat and set to work on smoothing the mixture around the sword. I'd never removed a katana from a person before. I'd helped my sister pull a nail out of her foot though. It couldn't be much different, and probably just as painful.

I grasped the hilt of the sword. It belonged to the man called Hijikata, no doubt. The other sword was several feet away and had a red handgrip that matched the sheath tied to his waist. The blade glowed eerily in the morning rays.

Tediously, I worked on dislodging the katana from his chest. He was in pain and cruelly still holding on to his lucidness. The medicine I had smoothed around the wound couldn't do much until it actually sunk in and I doubted it would have much of an effect even then.

Maybe I should just have put him out of his misery. He was struggling to stay aware but I doubted he was making much sense in his mind.

The sun had risen considerably while I pulled gently at the sword and sweat had begun to collect on my brow. I almost had the tip of the blade out of his back. I bunched together some of the bandages to

hold the flow of the blood back when I finally managed to get the grey and black hilted katana out.

I'd have to move him after I got the sword out and I kind of wished my sister would come looking for me. She was probably too preoccupied with the other man. The name Hijikata sounded familiar but I couldn't quiet place it.

"I've almost got it out," I commented to break the silence. I wondered if he could still hear me or even understand what I was saying. His breathing deepened a little so I guessed he could at least hear me. I thought I saw his eyes pinch together slightly but I couldn't take my eyes off my work to better check.

The blade disappeared and I clamped the bandages to the wound where blood had started to pump out. I maneuvered the rest of the sword out, careful not to cause more damage with the slightly curved tip.

With the sword finally out I sat him up, which was much more difficult than I had assumed, and quickly wrapped the bandages tightly around his chest. He wheezed. That was probably a good sign.

For once, I was glad of my monstrous strength. I was able to haul him over my shoulders and balance him there like a sack. I tried not to aggravate the wound but that wasn't possible. I could already feel his blood on my shoulder.

I had to hurry back. He'd die if I didn't do something about the hole in his chest.

"Don't you dare die,"

* * *

><p>Review, please!

2. The girl with empty eyes

**Please review! **

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 2: The girl with empty eyes.

I didn't regret losing to Hijikata Toshizo. I tried to tell myself it was okay to lose; I wasn't going back to anything afterwards. If I died, that was that.

I thought I might have died. His sword was aimed well and took me through the left side of my chest. If he didn't have my heart he definitely had a lung. I should have died. Oni weren't as infallible as one might have thought.

Shortly after the battle ended I was dragged back to the surface of my dark conscious by the warm rising sun against my face. It was

brutally unrelenting and I found it impossible to drift away again, even when I thought I might succumb to the pain and finally die. I cursed my Oni blood for making me suffer so.

Light footsteps scuffed the ground and I tensed up, aching all over from the strain my body was taking from being so near death. I felt the shadow of a person fall over me and if I could have moved my arms I would have touched somebody's feet.

A gentle hand took my shoulder and my eyes opened, more out of surprise. They felt dry and sticky and the sunlight was painfully strong. She gasped and I struggled to focus on her face. I wanted to glare but I was too numb to even twitch. It was a miracle my eyes had managed to open. I had to fight to keep them that way.

Her hazy form went in and out of focus as my eyes drooped; I only caught bits and pieces. She had dark hair with a green hue in it that was pinned in a fat and messy bun, equally messy bangs that framed her pale face, and startling yellow eyes. Her look of astonishment passed and her expression became dull, or empty. I caught her unusual gaze once before my eyes closed. I couldn't open them again.

* * *

><p>I forgot who I was when the pain hit me again in pulsating waves, like the ocean had taken me to sea and decided to throw me up against a rock cliff side. Every part of me felt like it was being pounded until my bones were reduced to dust. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't fight it or even call out. I felt like I was choking on thick, muddy, water.<p>

I tried to tell myself to think but the pain shook me to my core, tearing apart everything I could think of.

It was like a giant pin was nailed through me, slowly being driven further and further in until it might have opened a cavity in my chest. That hole would suck everything in around it until there was nothing left.

Panic seized me and I spun, round and round, looking for a way out. Everything was tinted red with angry shadows creeping in, slithering around my feet. It was the same no matter where I looked. Soon I was tied up in the shadows, unable to move an inch.

Suddenly, the stake through my heart was tugged out and the shadows untangled themselves, retreating into the darkness hovering around me. I rose and turned again, head heavy, looking for the source of my freedom. I still didn't know where to go.

A weightless feeling over took me and I lost my balance, hanging suspended by some unseen force. My energy was slowly leaving me again.

"Don't you dare die," I heard. It sounded like a command and I raised my head to the surface, trying to peer through the twilight water, looking for the owner of the delicate feminine voice. Nobody commanded me.

I kept my head just slightly above the water, floating on my back with my head tilted back, eyes and ears underneath the surface. I

breathed lightly through my nose and mouth, trying not to take in more water.

For a long time it continued. My stamina lessened until I thought I might disappear inside the mirror again, trapped there behind the glass wall.

I touched down with a slight thump that sent shivers of pain through my body. My skin was being pinched away, leaving cool patches behind. A freezing hand rested on my chest, pressing down until I couldn't breathe. A flurry of crows swarmed me, black feathers dancing about.

The torture was relentless and I fought against the invisible arms pinning me down. They were infinitely stronger and didn't give against me.

"He's still got a lot of energy for someone almost dead." A voice dripping with cool disinterest.

"He might actually live if he's this stubborn," another voice, warm like honey.

"Kazama-san is an Oni, like me," a painfully familiar voice.

"We know," warm and cool.

"A human would be dead by now," obviously.

"I would be dead too, I'm not pure like the two of you," who?

"Turn him over, there's no point in sewing up one side and leaving the other side leaking."

I nearly lost my balance, head lulling. Someone sat on my lower back, pinning my arms with their knees. I was so weak I couldn't struggle against them. My legs were like udon noodles.

My senses were slowly beginning to return and I could at least tell I was on a futon, chest stripped bare. My hair irritated one ear and stuck to the eyelashes of both eyes. I struggled to see and peeked at closed shoji doors with decorative washi paper. I couldn't quite comprehend the pattern before my eyes failed again. Nobody even noticed.

"Kazama-san?" she paused then started again, worry in her light voice. "He's not moving, is he alright?"

"His heart is still beating," a small, wet hand against my back. I would have grunted if I had the energy. "Almost finished,"

I had to wonder what she was almost finished with, then felt her breath close to my back and cold shivers scurried up and down my spine. I heard the sound of her teeth nibbling on something that sounded suspiciously like twine or thick thread. It clicked then. She was sewing me up. I shivered again, could I really trust a woman to do such a job? I was surprised I hadn't felt anything.

Once again, I was flipped over and my eyes rolled into the back of my head. Her hand supported my neck as someone else fitted a pillow

underneath.

"He's not out of danger but this is all we can do for him, best leave him to rest quietly."

"I can't thank you enough . . ."

"It was my pleasure to help. Why don't you go take a rest? I bet you could sleep right through the day and night!" her voice was strong and mature with good humor; I assumed she was the oldest.

The crinkling of stiff cotton alerted me to the exit of the first woman.

"Are you going off to bed now?"

"No, "

"You haven't slept since yesterday morning. You've had a long night and you carried him all the ways here; you even dressed his wounds. You must be mentally and physically exhausted," there was genuine concern in her voice.

"I'll continue to watch after him. It'd be unfortunate if he died after all this time." There was finality in her small, monotone, voice.

A deep, long sigh. "Even you will get tired if you keep pushing yourself like this. What are you trying to accomplish?"

"Nothing, "

Swiftly, the elder of the two stood up and stomped out. If I could I would have cracked a lid curiously.

I heard the splash of water and a tired huff. My skin crawled with the grinding chime of a sword being unsheathed and I strained to feel her motive.

"You've a frightening sword."

* * *

><p>Please review!

3. The man with the vulgar mouth

Please review! I've edited the first two chapters a little, so review if you see a mistake that you want fixed!

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 3: The man with the vulgar mouth.

I had a feeling that he was still conscious after sewing his wound shut. I didn't think he could feel it though; the iris root cream

already had a while to sink in and didn't often fail. It was especially effective on Oni like Kazama and my sister and I.

It had little effect on the man Hijikata, who I learned was the former vice captain of the Shinsengumi. That was why his name had seemed so familiar.

I wondered why he'd been fighting with Kazama Chikage, the Oni. I couldn't even begin to comprehend his strange transformation from human to Oni, or Rasetsu as his companion had stated.

The woman with him was Yukimura Chizuru, a pureblooded Oni with kinder eyes than anybody else I'd ever met. I hadn't actually met that many people so maybe my opinion was weak. She was about the same age as my sister.

Onee-san had reassured Chizuru that she could do something about his transformation. Chizuru seemed skeptical but wanted to rest her fate in my sister's abilities anyways.

Bored, I began inspecting Kazama's sword. It was wonderfully crafted with strange, repulsive steel. "You've a frightening sword," the fingers on his right hand curled in response. He should have been too weak to do anything but numbly lie there so I guessed his Oni blood was working to his advantage. I touched my finger to his blade, drawing blood. The paper thin slice healed in seconds.

I was surprised it was still sharp. There were a few chips in places where his and Hijikata's blade had met. Hijikata's sword was actually in worse condition and I doubted it could be repaired by even a skilled smithy. If Kazama had lasted a few minutes longer they'd be in reverse, only Hijikata wouldn't have been alive.

They both seemed like fierce men. Hijikata had held onto consciousness much the same as Kazama had. I thought Kazama was the more resilient of the two, since he'd been through hell compared to Hijikata.

I cleaned Kazama's sword on a scrap of his Western coat, sheathing it quietly. I laid it at his side. He wasn't a threat to me in his current condition, he wouldn't even be strong enough to sit up for a while, let alone stand.

I looked over at him. The crease between his brows had smoothed out slightly and I waddled over to him on my knees, curiously hovering over him. His breath tickled my chin and I leaned back, satisfied. I kept thinking he was going to die.

When I'd arrived, Nee-san had run to help me into an empty room. Calling for Chizuru to boil some water and prepare supplies. It didn't surprise me that she already had her running around like a servant.

After laying him down I immediately stripped my haori and hakama off. Both were covered in his blood. I'd even managed to get some in my hair, which had been pinned up. I'd need a bath later.

I dressed myself in a loose yukata before setting to work on him. Nee-san hadn't had a steady enough hand to do the stitching.

Looking down at his face now I could imagine he would survive. My lip twitched into an almost smile and I smoothed his eyebrows out with one finger. I even tucked him in before returning to my zabuton.

I wouldn't lie to myself, I was dead tired. I rolled the zabuton up to use as a pillow and lid down on the tatami floor. It was pointless to stay if I was just going to sleep but I didn't feel like leaving him alone. Maybe another presence would be reassuring for him just as it was for me.

* * *

><p>"Eh? I thought you were going to watch over him?"<p>

I jolted awake, squinting at the morning light shining in through the open shoji doors. Nee-san stood in front of rays, making it difficult to see the expression on her face. She sounded amused.

"I did. He didn't die so I took a break," I yawned, rubbing sleep out of my eyes and sitting up stiffly. I might have regretted staying. I glanced over at him, seeing his chest rise and fall rhythmically. He seemed alright.

"You didn't bandage him up afterwards," Nee-san commented, seeing his chest bare. I thought I'd tucked the blanket up to his neck? I guess he'd moved a bit in his sleep.

"The iris based medicine I used is like a seal. I didn't really need to bandage him since he wasn't moving about." I paused to rub my eyes. "You also left and he's heavy and he stinks too."

Nee-san giggled and took an exaggerated sniff. "I don't think he smells that bad,"

I scoffed. "You can't tell the difference between the scent of oranges and apples."

She shrugged and came in, shutting the door behind her. She had bandages and a wooden bucket full of water with a cloth hanging on the side. "Let me give you a hand then,"

The first thing I noticed when I pulled back the cover was the mark on his arm was completely healed, just a smudge of blood left. I hadn't bothered with it yesterday since it had already scabbed over. It was nice to know that his healing hadn't slowed any.

"He does smell a bit sweaty," Nee-san admitted.

"Told you,"

I took the damp cloth and began softly working around the wound on his chest, cleaning away the dried blood and flaking cream. I supposed I could wipe the rest of his chest and arms down afterwards.

"Help me sit him up," I gestured for Nee-san to support his head and good shoulder while I took the other.

"Right away, Ayame-sensei," Nee-san replied with phony respect. She was humoring me since I'd decided to care for him. Our abilities to

take care of wounds were about the same, though I usually dealt with animals. Hinata-onee-san went to the villages during festivals and people often sought her for her medical knowledge.

I finished cleaning the slightly smaller wound on his back and swished the cloth around in the water bucket before wringing it out again. The water had cooled down in the short time and I wondered if it would be uncomfortable for him. He hadn't even stirred so maybe not, it seemed like he was sleeping it off.

"They both have such nice bodies," Nee-san remarked, smiling creepily at me.

I reminded her that she was a shrine maiden and a substitute god. She laughed at me and playfully slapped my shoulder.

"Ayame-chan doesn't get to leave the temple grounds very often. Aren't you interested when you see new people?"

I tossed the cloth in the bucket after scrubbing the dirt and grime off his chest and shoulders, being mindful not to wake him. His chest was nicely sculpted.

"Very," I agreed.

"Very what?" she teased.

"Very interested."

I rinsed the cloth off again and wrung it dry, gently swiping it over his forehead, high cheek bones, straight nose, and sharp jaw line. He wasn't ugly like other men I'd seen. His skin was oily though, which wasn't attractive at all. I said as much and Nee-san howled with laughter.

His eyelids pinched and he frowned. His long eyelashes quivered as he struggled to open his eyes.

"You woke him," I chided.

Nee-san halted her laughter, covering her mouth with the sleeve of her kimono. "Sorry, sorry,"

The man called Kazama finally opened his scarlet eyes with some energy and he gazed about, wearily. Nee-san immediately shoved me out of the way to sidle up next to him.

"Good morning, how are you feeling?" her voice was full of kindness and gave the air of being completely approachable.

He glared at her. I almost laughed as Nee-san visibly deflated a size. He wasn't in a very good mood. Neither would I if I was in his position.

He tried to move without much progress. His arms strained and his chest muscles bulged, stitches being pulled tightly. He shut his eyes against the pain and panted. He looked pathetic in my opinion.

"Please don't force yourself, you're in terrible shape. It's a

miracle you lived, Oni blood aside." Nee-san pleaded. She sincerely wished for him to get well, which was one of her good points.

"Who are you?" he sounded defensive, like a scared fox kit. I assumed it was because we knew of his Oni nature. I'd be worried too.

"I'm Miyaki Hinata, a half Oni, and this is my younger sister, Miyaki Ayame," Nee-san introduced warmly, gesturing back at me. I sat up a little straighter but it didn't really improve my appearance. I'd slept in my yukata and could feel that the sash was sideways. My bun was messier than usual.

He looked over and quirked a blonde eyebrow. I read too far into the facial expression and felt like he was unjustly determining my worth. His glare had abated and he looked mildly entertained.

"I carried you here on my back and treated your wounds," I informed him, "show some gratitude,"

Kazama returned to his scowling. "Thank you," he drawled in his deep, slow, dialect. He was being blatantly sarcastic. "I would have been fine in a day or two anyways."

I bristled and almost stood up, probably to stomp on his chest, but Nee-san interrupted. "I don't think you understand the severity of your wound. Even for an Oni, the wound you bear is quite serious,"

He broke his stare from me to Onee-san, looking unimpressed with her.

"Who do you think tugged that damn sword out of your chest?" I challenged. "Were you going to wake up and pull that out yourself? I don't think so,"

He sputtered and tried to push himself up, managing to get himself on one elbow. The stitches strained and the wound opened at the seams. He nearly passed out and flopped back on his back. His breathing came faster and in heaves. I hoped he was choking on his own blood.

"Ayame-chan, will you go get some tea for our patient?" Nee-san suggested. I liked how she was addressing him. That would put the bastard in his place. He should understand just how weak he was. As I passed I hooked my foot under his sword and popped it up, taking it with me.

"Where are you going with that?" he called after me, rattled.

"Nowhere,"

When I got back Nee-san had already wrapped his chest up and even given him an armrest to help prop himself up. He looked grumpy.

"I've brought your tea," I announced.

He turned his head slightly in my direction, noting my improved appearance. I'd pinned my hair up again and changed into my usual red

hakama and white haori. I had Kazama's red sheathed sword tucked into my belt and my own sword next to it. It felt odd having two.

"Oh? You're a shrine maiden also?"

I really hated that tone of his. He was so denoting when he didn't know anything.

"We're not miko," I objected, "Nee-san is the land god in place of Takeshi-sama and I am her shrine guardian in place of a pair of komainu."

He looked perplexed. "So, two half Oni are taking care of spiritual land, because the master is away?"

"Uh-m, Takeshi-sama owns the mountain lands in all the North so it's difficult for him to manage them all."

Kazama seemed fascinated by that, which I found unexpected.

"Who is Takeshi-sama? What is Takeshi-sama?" maybe he thought Takeshi-sama was just some human who claimed to own the land.

"Takeshi-sama is a Tengu."

"Oh?"

I grinned subtly and began to pour his tea. I regretted bringing two cups. "You should meet him sometime, he'd put you in your place,"

He tensed up and sneered at me. "You're just a child,"

I balked, gripping the teapot handle harder than I'd meant to. I heard it snap and Kazama looked up, delighted by my temper.

"I'm not a child,"

"How old are you?" he challenged.

"Fifteen,"

He laughed, holding his chest. I was glad I could make him feel pain but disappointed that he had laughed. Fifteen was plenty old.

"You're still a child," he disputed.

I huffed, handing him his tea begrudgingly. Kazama took it which I supposed was alright. He could have stubbornly refused and then I could have thrown it at him. I poured myself some and he noticed the second cup for the first time.

"Oh? Keeping me company?" he snickered between a sip. "There's no need. As you can see, I'm too weak to run away."

I grunted, uninterested in his jesting. He was saying he wasn't here by choice and preferred to be alone.

"It's boring here. I'd rather play prison guard than silent

sentinel,"

"Do you see much action up here?" he casually asked. "Various demons trying to seize your Tengu-sama's land?" he suggested.

I peeked over the rim at his face. He was looking away, pretending to be making light conversation.

"Not really." I paused, gauging his reaction. He shrugged. "There's this one young kitsune that competes with a tanuki. They like to see who can get closest to the shrine before I chase them away,"

"Oh?" a small smile.

I grinned, imitating fox ears, "It's the Oni girl, run!" I cuffed my hands, making rounder ears and said in a deeper voice. "Run! Save your own tail!" I moved my knuckles across to my forehead, ruffling my bangs and made horns with my fingers. He smiled a bit more. "Get back here, bastards!"

He chuckled, holding his chest again and I lowered my hands. I felt kind of bad for intentionally trying to make his wound hurt, but hearing him laugh was nice. I'd thought he was a horrible jerk, which he still was. Just not quite as terrible.

"Do you always speak so coarsely?" Kazama asked, red eyes twinkling from tears of pain or mirth.

I didn't really think I spoke that roughly. "Nee-san scolds me for it sometimes but it's not like we have guests that often. I don't speak to anyone when I accompany her to the villages at the base of the mountain either. Does it bother you?"

He grinned. "It's funny, your bark is much worse than your bite,"

I glowered at him. "You haven't seen my bite yet,"

He rested his chin on his fist, and leaned towards me, measuring me with his snake like eyes again.

"I see a girl scarcely five shaku in height with sickly white skin. You remind me of a flower, or maybe a monkey,"

Kazama guffawed at my enraged expression and clutched his chest, laugh turning to a sputtering cough.

"Are. You. Okay?" I seethed. I took a gulp of my tea to distract myself from imagining what it'd be like to ram my foot down his throat.

He shook it off and leaned heavily against the armrest. I hoped it would tip over.

"Might I just remind you that I carried you from the base of the mountain to the temple grounds, approximately five _hundred_ shaku up?" he considered that quietly, still appraising me. I guess I should have been flattered. "I had to throw my other haori away because it was streaked with your blood,"

He took a sip and frowned at me. "Prove it." What was there to

prove?

I leapt to my feet, pulling the shoji screen open noisily and padded off to my room, two doors down. My room was a mess and the one room that Nee-san refused to enter. I picked the blood stained haori off the floor and debated taking the hakama too but left them. The haori was enough of a statement.

I ran back, leaving my room door open to air out. It kind of smelled like blood in there. I left the door to Kazama's room open too. Fresh air would be good for him.

"See?" I held the haori open, thick trail of darkened blood clearly visible. "You bled through the bandages easily after I pulled the sword from your chest. I was worried that you were gonna die of blood loss before I even got you here, but you're one tough bastard,"

I lowered the haori to see his expression. He had paled. I guess he could believe the severity of his wound now.

Kazama nodded slowly. "I guess I have to thank you and your sister too, for stitching me up,"

I felt my eye twitch, "Hah? Sorry to say, but I'm the one who stitched your wound,"

His head snapped up, blonde hair swaying. "You sewed it shut?"

I nodded, proudly smiling. That's right, be amazed by my skill. "Nee-san doesn't have steady hands,"

He had a disgusted look plastered across his face.

"What?"

He shook his head, "You're a strange girl,"

I glared at him. "Did you expect me to be grossed out by a bit of blood and a man's bare chest after pulling a sword out of said man's chest and carrying him up a mountain with him still bleeding profusely?"

He held a hand up, which trembled from the effort, "Enough, you've made your point,"

"Eh? Are you easily sickened by talk of such things?" if he was, I'd never let him live it down.

Kazama glowered at me. "It's improper for a girl to speak of such things,"

I snorted. "I haven't exactly grown up in a proper household." I patted my katana, stroking the hand guard that was in the shape of the imperial chrysanthemum. Kazama eyed it with quiet interest.

"Can you wield a katana of such size?"

"It belonged to my father and teacher." I explained. "It should have been Hinata-onee-sama's but she doesn't need a sword. The sword I previously used was something I bought cheap in town and snapped

after a few uses. I took to using this sword after that and I've grown used to it,"

"May I see it?" he inquired.

I bit my lip. I didn't really like to part with it. "I guess,"

I passed it over reluctantly. I still had his red sword so I could call collateral.

He examined the black sheath, looking at the inscription. "Imperial Chrysanthemum?"

"The name of the sword,"

He nodded. The hilt guard was self explanatory, being shaped like a chrysanthemum and all. The hilt itself was yellow and black with a red tassel and a carved chrysanthemum set in the butt of the hilt.

It clicked open and he drew the half way out. I could see him gritting his teeth against the pain; no doubt it was difficult for him to stretch his arms. He settled for viewing it as it was.

The steel had an unearthly glow to it, much like Kazama's. I wondered if their origins were similar.

"Demon steel," he breathed.

"Nee-san told me that he was a mercenary of sorts and went around hunting demons for a price in his younger days. He brought back the bones, fangs, horns, and scales of those he slayed and gave them to the village's smithy. That's how the Imperial Chrysanthemum sword came into existence."

He interpreted that carefully. "So, your father was not an Oni?"

"He was just a human," I confirmed. "He was a man of the Agano clan who live south of here and the next head before he died."

"How long ago did he die?"

I thought it over, "It'll be nine years this month,"

Kazama nodded thoughtfully. "What about your mother?"

"Agano Mai, formerly Kurosawa Mai, deceased on the same day," I paused. I had difficulty thinking about her reasonably. "I don't really remember her that well. She was . . . distant?"

A silence enveloped us as I struggled to remember something meaningful about her.

"Oi, girl," Kazama interrupted.

"What?" I responded.

"You said Kurosawa, right?" there was a peculiar glint in his eyes.

"Uh-m, I did," I pursed my lips, "So?"

"That makes you a part of one of the four noble Oni clans,"

"Hah?" I didn't really get that.

He sighed; he should have realized I wouldn't know stuff like that. I was too young when she passed on to know anything about her history.

"The four noble Oni clans represent the cardinal directions; North, East, South, and West. They are regarded as the strongest Oni in each direction. In the North are the Wakehisa; in the East, the near extinct Yukimura; in the South is your mother's family, the Kurosawa; and in the West, my family, the Kazama."

I'd been trying to figure out how to ask his name without seeming strange, and at the same time I'd had to keep from saying his name accidentally. He hadn't introduced himself and accidentally saying his name would have led to me having to explain that Chizuru had said his name.

I wondered if that would agitate him. I didn't really know their relationship and worried that he'd be distressed knowing the man who cut him down was on the other side of the temple.

"Ho, so what's your full name?" I asked, trying to sound natural.

I guess he'd been trying to educate me on the Oni families because he looked disappointed. "Is that all you gathered from that?"

"Well, I don't really care about the other Oni clans or whatever. I'll probably live my whole life here anyways,"

He shook his head at me. "You live in such a tiny world,"

"So what?" I sputtered, embarrassed. So what if I didn't know about the world outside Takeshi-sama's land?

He chuckled quietly, being mindful of his wound. "Kazama Chikage,"

"Kazama Chikage-san . . ." I thought it over. "Sounds deep, much cooler than Miyaki Ayame,"

He sniffed, holding back laughter. "I've been wondering about that. If you're father's name was Agano and your mother's name was Kurosawa, why do you use Miyaki?"

I smiled ruefully. "Nee-san made it up. The Kurosawa name is dangerous for us since we've been running from them since we can remember. Agano links us to our father's clan and their bloody history. Neither sounded too appealing so Nee-san came up with "Miya", shrine, and "ki", hope,"

"You've been running from your mother's clan?" he questioned, appalled.

I giggled. "Is that all you got out of that?" I imitated. I almost pinched myself. I sounded like I was flirting.

"Why would they be chasing after you?" he repeated, seriousness in his voice. Either he hadn't noticed my accidental flirting or he chose to ignore it, which was a relief for me.

I frowned. "At first it was because our mother eloped with a human," I took a deep breath, "afterwards I guess we were just an eyesore. We ran as far north as we could but they still pursued. That's when Takeshi-sama rescued us."

Kazama crossed his arms as best as he could while leaning on the armrest, thinking hard, sword sheathed and rested against the floor. "The Kazama clan has never had to deal with that sort of problem before."

Tears were collecting in my eyes. I guess that's how other Oni thought of us. "Uh-m, we were a problem." I stood up and collected my tea cup and the pot. "I'll be back for your cup later."

He didn't say another word as I left. Maybe that was better.

* * *

><p>Please review!

4. The girl with bad habits

I'm kinda sad. I'm not getting any reviews T~T if I ask, will you review :D? If I beg, will you definitely review :D? I know I chose one of the least favorite characters but there are Kazama Chikage fans out there too :D Please review? I'm begging D: and I don't beg . . usually :D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 4: The girl with bad habits.

I didn't mean to upset the half Oni girl. I was pondering aloud and hadn't realized that it might have been a painful topic for her. I'd forgotten how frail children were, especially young girls.

The wound on my chest throbbed and I absently held my hand over it. She was a strange girl. It was amazing how differently she acted just from growing up away from the customs of regular society. She was unafraid of things that normal girls, human or Oni, would have found terrifying.

The tea she had served was good, with an unusual taste and scent. I assumed it was an original blend with ingredients acquired on the mountain. It was slightly spicy, pleasantly warm with every sip. I wished I'd asked for seconds, and something to eat. My stomach was growling uneasily.

I looked down at my bandaged chest, seeing a small stain of red on the pristine white cotton cloth. My gaze wandered to the white haori she'd left on the tatami. She was a messy person, leaving her stuff about. She'd even forgotten to take her father's precious sword with

her, though she still had my Douji-giri.

A small tin with a paper covering was abandoned just within my reach. There was an orange and an iris flower painted on it in water color.

I sighed as I reached for it, feeling the stitches tugging slightly. I didn't want to rip them; being sewn up once was enough for me.

With the canister finally retrieved I opened it, curiously peering at the creamy substance. It smelt familiar and I concluded that it was the same wound remedy that the Kazama used. I guessed most Oni would be familiar with it, since the iris had a particularly strong soothing effect on us. That was why I hadn't felt anything earlier.

Soft footsteps trod up the hall and I wondered if she was already coming back to take my cup. I still had a mouthful left and gulped it down.

She turned the corner, her long raven black hair swaying. I let out a relieved breath. It was the older sister.

"I brought you some food," she greeted cheerily. She was infinitely more polite than her younger sister and I wondered why she didn't teach her manners to her imouto. That would have been appropriate with their mother gone.

"Thank you," I replied. She tried to act friendly but I found her overbearing. She wasn't as difficult to deal with as the younger one but slightly more irritating.

She had a bowl piled high with white rice and a bowl of miso soup with red meat and lots of vegetables. I would have preferred something a little blander but I wasn't in a position to complain. My stomach was growling loudly enough to be heard.

"Eat up and recover your strength," she smiled to me, setting the table tray next to me.

I nodded and picked up the bamboo chopsticks.

"Oiya? She didn't leave the tea pot?"

I shrugged just a bit, being extra aware of my wound. "She left with it and her tea cup a few minutes ago,"

The corners of her lips tugged up slightly. "She drank tea with you?"

"I couldn't get rid of her for the longest time," I joked, taking a scoop of rice.

She giggled behind her hand, eyes narrowed. I felt a shiver run down my entire body. I felt like she was calculating me. I furrowed my brows slightly, hoping she'd leave when she saw that she wasn't welcome. She reminded me of my mother, only less strict and more mysterious.

I thought she might have noticed that I distinctly didn't like her; it wouldn't have been hard since I wasn't hiding it, but she continued to sit and watch me eat. Nervously, I plucked a piece of meat from the miso soup.

"Ayame-chan seems to have taken interest in you," she commented.

I swallowed, it tasted good but it was going down in lumps. I wasn't usually the type of man to be intimidated by such a woman. I didn't know how to respond to her.

"She told me she doesn't speak to many people, perhaps that is why she's so interested?"

"Maybe," she agreed, "but we are also taking care of another man at the moment and she has yet to show any interest in him,"

"Maybe he isn't as charming as I?" I challenged. I didn't think much of the other man. The war was on their doorstep, it probably wasn't uncommon for them to pick up stray soldiers.

She laughed behind the sleeve of her white miko's robe and I felt a prickle of unease. I hated how women did that, it made them seem so damn enigmatic. If she had a fan hidden in her sleeve it wouldn't have surprised me.

"Maybe. I suspect she's just curious. We haven't seen another Oni in quite a while. You're also the first we haven't had to either run from or be blatantly skeptical of."

"Why aren't you?" I questioned. "Though I am in a pathetic condition, I could still pose a threat to you and your sister. The moment I'm well enough to stand, I might run off and reveal your position to other Oni, or even turn on you," I hated to sound like a bad guy, but I wouldn't stand to be underestimated.

She cackled, amused. I scowled at her. I was being perfectly realistic.

"I can't speak for my own strength, since I'm scarcely stronger than you in your current condition, but I have plenty of spells that would prevent you from ever leaving or finding your way back should you try." She paused, a solemnly cold glint in her usual warm brown eyes. "My little sister's strength is not to be taken lightly. She's more fearsome than you assume and can't yet control that monstrous strength. She's truly like a furious mountain god and is more suited to the warrior's path than that of a shrine guardian." She relaxed and grinned jealously. "I wish I'd been born strong and true as she has been."

I scoffed. "You sound as though you're advertising her for marriage."

She hid her lips behind a sleeve, eyes slyly smiling. "Maybe,"

I literally felt like I was sweating. She was playing matchmaker? Her sister was only fifteen . . . then again; Chizuru had been around that age when I first started to pursue her. Still, Ayame was a naïve child who didn't even know what it was like to live anywhere but here.

"Sorry, but I'm looking for a pureblooded Oni to take as my wife," I didn't care what response I got for that.

"Too bad, I guess." The snaky look disappeared and she returned to looking somewhat normal.

I felt puzzled and I wanted to hit myself for it. Tentatively, I ventured forth. "For what reason did you try to marry your sister off? Isn't she your important shrine guardian?"

She huffed at me, coming close to fully glaring at me but she didn't seem quite capable enough to be angry. "Isn't it easy to tell that she hates it here on this mountain?" a forlorn expression filled her eyes. "I want to protect her but she's self destructive. Life in solitude doesn't suit her, she needs to be someplace where she can interact with other people and direct her curiosity."

"Then why not let her leave the mountain?" that sounded like the best solution to me.

She chuckled humorlessly. "Where would she go? To my father's clan, the Agano? They'd just use her as a weapon. To the Kurosawa Oni? They'd imprison her and use her as a weapon."

I sat up a little straighter, food forgotten. "She's only half, why would they use her as a weapon?" half Oni didn't have the same regenerative abilities and strength as the purebloods.

She turned slightly from me. "I don't know. I've seen her strength, and so have the Kurosawa." She took a shaky breath. "I can't describe to you the scene that follows her when they meet and fight. I'd surely be dead if not for her."

I frowned, thinking hard. She seemed to notice that I was being distracted by her and her stories and stood up. "Eat before your food gets cold, do you want some more tea?"

"No thanks, I'll manage with the miso soup."

* * *

><p>The day passed in relative silence, save for the sounds of nature. It reminded me of home, the way the woods protected the property.<p>

I heard either Miyaki pass on more than one occasion but couldn't tell them apart based on their foot falls yet. I thought Ayame might have been the lighter of the two; she was a half shaku shorter than her sister. Then again, my younger sister was about the same height and sounded like an elephant when she walked.

It was hard not to think about home. I'd been fully prepared to die so I hadn't thought about what I would do afterwards. I had disobeyed my family and very nearly the way of the Oni. I didn't deserve to go back, especially after having been beaten.

Night came quickly and I lost sense of time. How long had I been unconscious? Surely no more than a day?

The darkness made me realize just how tired I was and I pushed the armrest away. The older sister, Hinata, hadn't been back for the dishes. Maybe she'd forgotten, or maybe she wasn't as neat as I'd given her credit for. That would explain her sister.

I was almost asleep when I detected the scent of smoke and quickly propped myself up with the armrest again. Was there a fire? I took a deep breath through my nose and scowled. It was tobacco smoke. Who was smoking? The other patient?

I lay down to sleep again but the smell was unrelenting. They were probably just outside on the decking. I sneered to myself. I sat up, breathing deeply but quietly. I didn't dare try to stand and instead crawled to the shoji, dragging my feet. Just the few feet between my futon and the door tired my body.

Carefully, I slid the door open, peeking outside.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

There she sat on the deck in nothing more than a pale green yukata, wet, green gleaming, black hair sprawled out around her like a midnight flower. Aside from it being ridiculously long I spotted a delicate kiseru, a smoking pipe, held daintily in her small hand.

"You!" I exclaimed.

She jumped, nearly tipping over the pot of ash next to her. She glared over at me, looking no guiltier than a cat. "Shh!" she hissed back.

"What are you doing? Are you stupid?" I accused. Of course she was stupid, smoking and sitting outside with wet hair. I hoped she caught a cold. I didn't think Oni could catch colds, even half Oni. "Does your sister know you smoke?"

She looked a bit regretful and nibbled on the mouth piece.

"She doesn't?" she nodded and took a half-hearted drawl, looking away, a blush rising to her face. The little blockhead, she knew what she was doing was inappropriate. She skillfully blew out, making a perfectly round circle of ghostly white smoke. I couldn't even do that. "I didn't start smoking until I was eighteen, and I'm a man! Women aren't supposed to smoke!"

"You have no right to scold me, old man!" she retaliated, tapping the spent tobacco into the ash pot. A light from a room further up came on and she hurried to hide the pot under the deck, slipping her kiseru into the belt of her yukata.

"You're caught now, you dolt,"

She smiled snottily, "No I'm not, Nee-san's nose is horrible,"

"I'll tell her that her stupid little sister was smoking," I threatened.

"No you won't, I'll pull your stitches next time I check on them, which will be tomorrow morning," she returned, triumphing.

I paled, I didn't doubt she would. Before I could rebuke I heard the door from up the corridor open.

"Ayame-chan?" she called, sticking her head out.

"Y-yes?" she replied. The little dunce sounded fake, I wondered if she'd get herself caught.

"Did you just get back from the bath?"

"Yes," for once she spoke politely, that should have alerted her sister.

Hinata walked out onto the deck, closing the door behind her. "Your hair is still wet, where's your towel?" she asked. She spotted me and gasped. "Kazama-san, what are you doing out of bed?"

"I heard your sister," I couldn't say smelled without getting a queer look and I wasn't in the mood to be on the younger one's bad side. I felt like such a coward but Ayame was watching me carefully out of the corner of her vibrant amber eyes.

"It sounded like you two were arguing, were you?"

"He was lecturing me on indecency," she provided, "yet he's the one staring, how indecent? What a pervert,"

I grinded me teeth, two could play at the game. "Ho? What's there to see? Besides, I was just roused from my sleep by the smell of smoke." Her cocky expression disappeared and her mouth dropped. "I went to investigate and I found you,"

Hinata leaned down and sniffed the top of Ayame's head and I could see her trembling. I could say her fear was unnecessary but the older sister had a sinister aura about her. She knew what I was implying.

"You do smell of smoke."

"T-the lantern! The oil must have been bad since it was smoking a lot," she stuttered.

She was a horrible liar. She was caught and it wasn't really my fault. I hadn't directly said she was smoking.

"Oh? Really? I see, I see!" and with that she turned and walked back to her room, a smile gracing her lips. It was my turn for my mouth to drop open in disbelief.

"That woman is really gullible,"

She breathed a breath of shaky relief. "Thank the gods; she would have skinned me alive!"

I rested my head on my forearm. The tension had ruined my strength.

She seemed to notice that I wasn't going back to my room and worked out in her bean sized brain that I wasn't staying by choice. "Could

it be," she grinned, "that you can't get back to your bed?"

"Oh, shut up," I snapped.

She produced her kiseru again and placed it to her lips, tasting the smoky mouth piece. She was clearly addicted and I scoffed at her. I couldn't remember the last time I'd used my kiseru. I couldn't even remember where mine was.

She leaned back and opened her door with one hand, poking the kiseru in. She stood up and rescued a hair tie from her sleeve, tying her hair up in a winding motion that impressed me. In a few seconds she had her hair in a messy bun, unimpressive by itself but slightly more considering her hair almost touched the floor while down. How could she keep her head up with so much hair?

She skipped over to me, shoving the door open with a crash. I was surprised her sister didn't get up again. "Shall I drag you back by your feet?" she inquired. "You deserve it for almost selling me out,"

"Please be gentle," I answered, voice dripping with bitterness. I hoped she didn't intend to cause further injury.

I was still wearing the Western pants and nothing else and longed to be in a kimono again. I hated the Western clothing and had only gone in it because everyone else was switching over for war attire.

She leaned down and actually grabbed an ankle, dragging me effortless to the futon. I nearly fainted from embarrassment and pain which was, I suppose, what she wanted. I was surprised the wound hadn't reopened but she had done it smoothly enough.

Momentarily dazed, I lid there, looking at the ceiling. She hovered over me and pinched my cheek and I snapped at her fingers, trying to bite them.

"Beast," she muttered and rolled me onto the futon with her foot. I had to admit she was stronger than she looked and I wondered if her sister's praise for her wasn't exaggerated.

She sat on her knees, supporting my head as she slipped the pillow under. She pulled the cover over and noticed the small dot of blood. She visibly stiffened. "Did I do that just now?"

"You did," I lied.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was being too rough," she gently touched the spot and frowned, then glared, a deep blush dying her cheeks. "Liar,"

I chuckled, "Don't pout, I was just teasing you,"

Her expression blanked as she tried to come up with a counter, still leaning over me with her finger lightly touching the wound. I couldn't help but look down; noting the collar of her yukata was suggestively loose.

Her expression dulled further as she discerned where I was looking and darkly applied pressure with her lingering finger.

"Looking somewhere?" she casually remarked.

I grit my teeth against the building pain, determined not to give in to her display of physical dominance. I'd show her who was boss when my wound healed. "I was just thinking you had bigger breasts than I'd originally thought," which wasn't what I'd meant to say.

She growled something unintelligible and straightened, pulling her collar tight and hunching her shoulders. I thought it was a compliment but still tried to hide underneath the thick blanket. I was worried she was going to cause me more bodily harm.

I wasn't quick enough and she flicked my chest, just next to the wound.

It felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. She shook her hand out as though she'd hurt herself and I wheezed.

"Oni style: finger flick from hell," she named it and stood, stomping out. She slammed the door behind her and clomped off to her room, closing the shoji door with a crash there too. I felt the walls shake.

"Ayame-chan?" Hinata called fearfully from her room.

I managed a pained laugh. She was funny, though dangerously strong. I guessed there were half Oni like her and women who had bad habits too.

* * *

><p>Review please!

5. The willful man

**I figured I'd add a little piece here again and beg for reviews :D Please? Reviews are really satisfying when I sit here and work for hours on one chapter. **

A hundred thanks for the first review sent by Krystal Asakura :D I really appreciated it!

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 5: The willful man.

He was a horrible pervert. Whatever qualities I had thought I liked about him were naïve fantasies. It didn't matter that he had a pretty face and nice muscles. I told myself that but I still ended up a half hour in bed without falling asleep. He was a lecherous man, looking at my chest. What a dirty old man!

Actually, how old was he?

* * *

><p>I woke up to the smell of breakfast cooking, which was a welcome but unusual smell.<p>

Nee-san's sense of smell was almost non-existence so the food she cooked usually tasted bland or completely off. She added spices that she wasn't supposed to and thought it would turn out alright. For her it did, since she couldn't taste or smell the difference, for other people, not so much. I assumed Chizuru was helping her.

Come to think of it, Chizuru's family name was Yukimura, which was pretty common but Kazama had listed it as the "near extinct" Oni of the East. Was Chizuru an Oni of the East?

Lazily I rolled over and gazed at the shoji door with its rainbow bubble pattern at the base. Nee-san had painted it for me.

I reluctantly got up and straightened out my yukata. I redid my hair and opened the shoji doors, letting the morning sunlight and fresh spring air in. The scent of summer was blossoming and I smiled with satisfaction. Summer was a nice season.

I stepped out onto the deck and squinted. I wasn't used to the glaring rays from the sun. I was so accustomed to staying up all night guarding the temple against an enemy that would probably never come. Perhaps that was the source of my pale skin? I hadn't noticed before.

Kazama probably wasn't up yet, he might have been sleeping his wound off again. I hoped Nee-san had fed him yesterday. That made him sound like a stray puppy we had adopted or something.

I giggled quietly to myself, bouncing down the open hall to his room. I was going to pull his stitches for his insubordination last night.

I shoved the doors open with a loud bang and immediately he rolled his head the other way, away from the assaulting light. His eyes languidly opened and he turned back to me, one hand blocking the sunlight.

"What?" he demanded, annoyed by my intrusion.

I left the doors open and almost skipped over to him before sitting heavily on my knees. "Wound care," I explained briefly.

He shut his eyes and tried to roll over, forgetting about his wound and hissing quietly when he realized it was impossible with the hole in his chest. "Go away,"

"You're not a morning person, huh?" neither was I, usually, but I was looking forwards to torturing him for embarrassing me last night. I didn't get mad, I got even.

He dragged the cover over his head and I hauled it back, a short lived game of tug-o-war. He didn't have the strength to play. He growled at me and covered his eyes with one arm. I trapped the arm and forced him to sit up. He could manage that now, which was good. More resistance.

I started to undo the bandages and he rubbed his eyes tiredly. His

bangs were messier than mine. He had needed a bath when he got here and definitely needed one now. He was crinkling his own nose in disgust so I guessed he thought so too, unless he was directing the gesture at me.

The wound had closed a bit more on both the front and the back but sadly the stitches didn't need any readjustments. There was a bit of dried blood and the iris cream had begun to flake again.

Nee-san had already been in to tidy up the room I noted. There were fresh supplies in one corner and my haori was missing. I jumped to my feet and grabbed the empty wooden bucket, dropping the clean cloth on top of the bandages. "I'll be right back," I called over my shoulder. "Don't you dare go back to sleep," I added.

The well was just out from the deck and I returned with water in less than a minute. His evil red eyes were closed and I thought he might have been sleeping sitting up. He peeled his eyes open and dully managed a nod.

"You're in a good mood," he commented as I set the water down next to him, gathering the medical supplies and laying them next to the bucket. I dipped the cloth in the water and began working around the edges of the wound, intentionally trying to catch the stitches. I must have succeeded because he seethed quietly. He could see what I was trying to do with his half lidded eyes.

I crawled on my knees to the head of his futon to reach the smaller wound on his back. He looked over his shoulder with strained effort. No doubt he was stiff as a board.

"I'm in a great mood. I get to torture you before breakfast and after breakfast too,"

He sighed at that. "What will you be torturing me with after?"

"Rehabilitation," I pronounced, which was the best way to cause him pain in name of a good cause.

"I see," he didn't look too pleased, "what will my rehabilitation include?"

"Walking," I chimed.

"Perfect," he replied sarcastically. He didn't sound too thrilled. "Just what I need,"

"Hand me the tin over there," I commanded, pointing to the round, palm sized, lidded can.

He didn't object and reached for it. The skin on his back pulled taut and I wondered if I had the stitches too tight. He passed the cream back without a word and I popped the lid off, the familiar smell of oranges and iris flowers floating up.

I dabbed the cool, translucent material on the wound and he flinched. He was sensitive to the cold. I went a couple inches out and he complained.

"You're doing that on purpose," he accused.

"I am, but hey, it smells nice,"

"It does," he agreed. "My mother makes it at home,"

"Is it an Oni recipe? It doesn't work quite as well on humans," I'd always found that strange.

"It is. Did your mother teach you how to make it?"

I shook my head, but he couldn't see me. "No, my mother didn't really spend much time with me. It was something my sister took with her from our old home but she could never get it right."

He looked back again, curious. "Then what is that if not the same thing my clan uses?"

"I remembered the scent," I explained, "I recreated it based on that."

"Oh?"

"Uh-m, it's my prized skill," I was proud of my nose, more proud of it than even my strength.

"The tea yesterday," he ventured, not quite surely, "was that your own blend?"

"Uh-m,"

"It was good,"

I pursed my lips; I didn't know what to say to that. One minute he was rude, the next he was flattering me. I hesitantly dragged myself back to his side. I held a glob of the perfumed medicine on the tips of my fingers and he shirked away.

"I just complimented you; you could at least be more subtle," he compromised.

Unwillingly, I scrapped some off before smearing the rest on. He still cringed.

"You're such a baby," I teased.

"And you're sadistic," he muttered back.

I tilted my head a little. The word sounded kind of familiar. "I'm what?"

"Nothing," he grinned, looking away.

I ignored him for a minute, wetting the cloth again and scrubbing the blood stain out. He'd have to do without soap. I flung it at him after lazily wringing it out.

"Oi!" he'd taken it across the face.

Kazama reached for me, as though he thought he could catch me. I

rolled out of his way and stood up, prancing out of the room, calling "You smell!" over my shoulder.

* * *

><p>I ate breakfast with Nee-san sometimes, but not usually.<p>

With our three guests, Nee-san was busy delivering food and checking on them. I was mostly taking care of Kazama so she only had to worry about Hijikata. Chizuru was in perfectly good health and she seemed to help my sister with work around the temple grounds.

I finished breakfast at my own pace before returning to Kazama's room. He was eating the last of the rice.

"Can't I even eat a meal in peace around here?" he grumbled through a mouthful. And he said I had bad manners.

"Don't mind me," he only had a bit of rice left anyways; that hardly qualified as interrupting his meal.

He laid his bowl down and balanced the chopsticks across the top. "Your sister said if you were going to make me walk anywhere it should be to the baths,"

I smirked a little, trying not to laugh. "You definitely need a bath,"

He shot me a sidelong glare before directing his attention to the armrest, leaning over it to force himself up onto his knees. His complexion almost immediately began to sicken. "Your sister said she has shoes for me on the back steps," he grunted, "and a yukata borrowed from your Tengu-sama at the bath,"

"Hah? I wonder when Takeshi-sama was here," I pondered aloud. Kazama was still trying to balance himself, on his knees. I offered him my hand and he glowered at me.

"There's no point if I can't get up on my own," he growled, deeply offended.

"Sometimes people need help standing up again," I rebuked. "Nee-san and I wouldn't have survived if Takeshi-sama hadn't offered us a hand,"

He took my outstretched hand begrudgingly, pulling himself up. I didn't help steady him or anything; I just let him use me since the armrest was getting him nowhere.

Just as he managed to finally stand, I noticed the Imperial Chrysanthemum on the floor next to his futon. "Ah! I was looking for that!" I exclaimed, gleefully diving for it.

He let go just in time. If he'd held on any longer he would have been pulled with me. I stood up straight and tucked the katana into my belt. I'd almost forgotten I'd even left it here.

I turned back to Kazama. He was swaying a bit and there was a light sheen of perspiration covering his arms, chest, and face. He didn't look impressed.

He was taller than I thought. I knew he was tall when I carried him back to the temple but I'd been tricked by the time he'd spent in bed. I felt kind of disappointed. When his strength recovered I'd be no match for him.

"Lead the way," he prompted, supporting himself against the door frame after a step and a half.

I snorted. "You're getting a bit conceited if you think you can order me around," I nudged his hip as I passed.

"Watch it," he sneered, pitching his hand on my shoulder to steady himself. I felt like walking out of his reach but I didn't think he'd get very far without something to hold onto.

He didn't say much after that, preferring to wallow in self pity as he used me as a walking stick all the ways to the back steps where he stepped into the oversized geta. The distance wasn't that great but it took nearly five minutes.

"How tall is your Tengu-sama?" he sneered.

I thought about it for a minute, pausing and allowing him to catch his breath. "I'd think he's close to eight shaku,"

"Seriously? Are you sure he's not a mountain troll?" he huffed, taking the last step onto the dirt path that led around the garden. The most wear was from the steps to the well, then off the property to the indoor and outdoor baths.

"I've seen his wings," I remarked proudly.

"Ho? What color are they?" he sounded gossipy, though maybe he was just trying to distract himself from the effort it was taking for him to walk.

I snuffed. "Who cares what color they were, they were absolutely huge! Each wing was twice his height, maybe more!"

"That's impressive." Kazama took another step and I shuffled alongside him. "I'm assuming his wings usually remain sealed?"

"Uh-m,"

I was back to being his crutch, carrying half his weight for him. "Speaking of sealed forms," I drawled uncertainly, "what does yours look like? Or less specifically, a typical Oni's?"

He scoffed. "You've never seen the Oni's true form?"

I pursed my lips. "I probably have," I defended, "I just can't remember."

"Can't remember?" he questioned.

I scuffed my foot as I waited for him catch up to me before taking another step, repeating, always staying an arm's length away. "It's hard to explain." I started unwillingly. "I don't remember a lot of

my childhood, only fragments of when I was really small. The rest are just a jumble that I don't understand at all."

Kazama's hand squeezed my shoulder slightly, maybe to reassure me. He was probably just swaying. "Amnesia?" he asked.

I nodded, "That's the word Nee-san uses. She thinks I've subconsciously made them disappear,"

"But you don't think that," he added.

I turned to look at him, his pale lips drawn tight, a layer of sweat on his brow. His crimson eyes bore back at me with more concern than I was used to.

"Uh-m, I feel like I still have the memories, I just can't remember what they meant." I knew I still had them, if not I wouldn't have dreams about things that I was clearly supposed to know but didn't.

It'd been so long since I'd last talked about it that I felt relieved. Nee-san's opinion never changed and she seemed to think I was better off not remembering. Kazama was sincerely interested and understood my thoughts on it better than she did.

"Your sister claims you're quite fearsome," he stated, "yet you yourself don't seem to think so."

"Ha? I'm plenty strong," I interrupted.

"Word choice. You choose to call yourself strong, yet your sister chose 'fearsome'. Doesn't that say your sister sees your 'strength' in a different light?"

I heard the bubble of the tepid stream adjacent to the hot spring. The bath house was just up ahead. "Uh-m."

Kazama sighed in relief now that the bath house was finally in sight. "She remembers something you can't. You two are sisters but you're on opposite sides of the spectrum. It might be wise of you to be considerate of her feelings,"

"Hah?" I challenged, "You're acting awfully compassionate. Must be the whole in your chest, you're just bleeding sympathy,"

He didn't seem to appreciate that. "How punny."

I snickered and left him at the entryway of the indoor bath, skipping along to the empty koi pond. It was never a koi pond, I just called it that. The ground here was warm to the touch and the various pools and streams of water either steamed or boiled. Only two were suitable for bathing, the sheltered indoor one and the outside one that was scarcely four shaku deep.

I rolled up my pale green yukata, exposing my legs up to the mid thigh and dangled them in the hot water. Kazama probably wouldn't be out of a while.

* * *

><p>Review please!

6. The girl with butterflies on her legs

****Please review :D I really, really, enjoy reading your reviews :D and happy New Year everyone :D New Year's Eve was great for me, I saw a peek in visitors and hits :DDD Thank you, everyone ^^ and a special thanks to Arcee-chan for reviewing :D ****

****I also got to see the fireworks first in all of North America :D****

*** * ***

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 6: The girl with butterflies on her legs.

Bathing took a while, and despite being refreshing it nearly took every ounce of my already depleted strength. I was just happy to be clean again and in real, Japanese, clothing.

The yukata was ridiculously long, with a tree branch pattern and various birds decorating the branches. Very surprising. I neatly folded the excess material behind the belt before stepping back into the gigantic geta sandals.

I was still wobbly on my feet but my balance was improving. I felt better than I had before. My hair dripped beads of cool water down my back, which wasn't entirely unpleasant.

I pushed past the bamboo blind door and into the thawing warmth of a spring day. After being in the bath house for so long it felt quite cooler, though there was no mistaking that the sun's glare was strong.

Ayame was sitting next to a pool of slightly steaming, murky, water with her legs submerged. Her yukata was bunched up around her thighs and the collar was once again loose. She didn't really mind her appearance at all, though she might have learned from last night that I was clearly a man. She probably didn't mind unless someone specifically made a remark about it.

I cleared my throat and she looked over, not surprised that I was there. She made no move to fix her yukata.

"Enjoy your bath?" she asked, swishing her feet through the water and stirring up clouds of dirt. The spring wasn't filled with river stones yet.

"Yes,"

She swung her legs out of the water, brushing the water off. I immediately noticed there was something quite wrong with her legs.

Glistening beneath drops of water were ornate butterflies in fiery oranges, jades, and cerulean shades with opaque black tips. A few sprigs of baby green sprouts provided perches for the bugs located

above and below her knees.

Noticing that I was blatantly gawking at her legs she quickly straightened her yukata and fixed the collar for good measure.

"Does your sister know you did that to your body?" I questioned, astonished that she'd even been able to get the retched tattoo, with or without permission. "Well?"

She blushed and stood up stiffly, shoulders hunched. "No . . ."

"I've known you for all of a day and a half and already I've seen you smoke and discovered your . . . tattoos!" I'd never known a girl who was so, rebellious. I was actually beginning to find it kind of funny. "Don't you bathe with your sister?"

She was silent for a moment, drying her feet on a patch of grass nearby. "Nee-san doesn't like sharing the bath," she paused. "You won't tell her will you?"

I shook my head slightly, mystified. Surely her sister wasn't that frightening? "You're such a delinquent,"

Ayame grinned a little at that.

I laughed, running my hand through my damp hair. "Who the hell agreed to prick you full of ink?"

"Ebisu," she said.

I was confused for a minute. "Not the god, right?"

She giggled, "Of course not. Ebisu lives on the coast south of here. He's just a blind, perverted, old man,"

I frowned at that. "Blind and perverted? How'd he manage then?"

She shrugged, "I don't know. He refused at first, saying he didn't want to accidentally mar a woman's legs,"

I snorted. "He did,"

She scowled at me. "He didn't,"

"You have butterflies on your legs, permanently," I pointed out. One good thing about being an Oni meant no scar was permanent.

"So? Aren't they pretty?" she scoffed at the blank look I returned. "It's not like an ugly scar or blemish, it's beautiful,"

"Ho? You keep telling yourself that," tattoos were certainly a blemish in my opinion. "So he refused at first?"

"Uh-m, though he promised to tattoo my legs for free if I could beat him in a sword fight," she smiled widely, holding an imaginary katana even though she had two at her side.

"That was silly of him," I grunted, "he was blind and you were not, he didn't stand much of a chance."

She shook her head in defense. "He was pretty strong, I was really surprised! So surprised that I almost lost . . ." she trailed off for a moment. "I heard from his niece latter that he was a samurai before his eyesight started to fail him."

"Even if he was a samurai before, you obviously aren't that great if a blind old pervert could almost defeat you," I rebuked. She was probably a self taught swordswoman.

She glared at me, her jeweled eyes piercing. I heard her sword click and she blinked from her spot, appearing before me with her sword drawn. If I'd been in a more capable condition I would have jumped back, but as I was I couldn't even see her when she moved.

"I'm impressed, you didn't even flinch," she growled, disappointed by my unmoved façade. I couldn't have moved (even if I wanted to) and I hoped she didn't realize that.

"You move well, for a half Oni," I admitted. "You would have found yourself on the ground and probably unconscious had you charged at me last week,"

Ayame stepped back and sheathed her sword. "Oh? You're good with a sword?" she pointed at my chest and I almost knew what she was going to say next. "Even though you were cut down after the blade touched you twice?"

I took a step forward and narrowed my eyes down at her. She met my gaze with her own ferocity. In my opinion, she needed to learn when to keep her thoughts to herself. "If I could knock you to ground, with or without a sword, then Hakuouki could have easily done the same,"

Her nose twitched and her eyes lowered for a moment, an expression I didn't quite understand.

"Hakuouki? Is that the name of the man who owned the sword in your chest?"

I stood up straighter. She was seriously dense, or maybe she just wasn't easy to intimidate. Either way, she'd changed the subject and left my pride in the dust. I was definitely going to knock her to the ground when I recovered, even if I was against using excessive force on children and women.

"It's what I decided to call him since his name didn't suit him as well," Hijikata was an Oni in his own right; it felt better to call him one.

"Ho?" she shared a knowing look with the sky and turned. "Let's go,"

I sighed. She didn't seem to pay attention to the mood. I tried to stay angry at her but it passed as we walked.

She stayed within an arm's reach the whole way back to the temple and though I was shaking with the effort it took for me to walk I could at least do it unassisted now.

The estate was very impressive, especially when viewing it from a distance, with two distinct wings pointing east and west. Coincidentally, my room was situated in the west.

I walked out of the geta at the stone steps and hobbled up the stairs. My legs still felt like they had lead weights strapped to them.

After I reached my room I sat down heavily on the deck, swinging my legs over the edge like I did at home. I rested my arms over the low beam, staring into the garden. I heard Ayame shuffling and looked over.

"At that again? It smells," I complained.

"Don't you smoke? You're only whining because you're not the one smoking," she shot back, gently laying her ash pot on the decking after wiping dirt off the base. She jumped back onto the decking and poked her head into her room, bending down to retrieve her kiseru and a small box of matches.

"You're addicted,"

"Probably," she granted.

"You're an idiot," I upgraded.

She huffed, not quite ready to lower herself that far, "I was thinking about letting you borrow my old kiseru, but I guess your health has to come first,"

"How kind of you," I remarked sarcastically, "thinking about my impeccable health before your own,"

"Hah? Impeccable, in what way is your current health 'impeccable'?" she challenged me to answer.

"Well," I replied, carefully at first, "I'm alive, and I'm recovering as swiftly as ever. I dare you to name someone who recovers faster,"

She nodded thoughtfully. "I've never been injured so severely so I can't say for certain." She paused, then amended, "I don't think I've even been injured so severely,"

"Maybe you cracked your skull?" I joked.

She struck a match and lit up the small metal cup of her kiseru. She placed the metal mouthpiece to her lower lip before responding. "I don't think so,"

"Aren't you worried your sister will catch you?"

Ayame lifted her free hand to her ear, "Hear that?" she mumbled, smoke escaping on her breath. "That's the sound of laundry being strung up on the other side of the temple." She exhaled through her nose, eyes at half mast. Either she really enjoyed smoking or she had something else added. "We haven't had guest in a while so she's probably airing out all the rooms on the east wing and the futons too,"

I thought there might have been a flaw in that logic. "What if she comes over here to clean?"

"She won't, there's nothing to clean on this side." She sounded pretty certain of that.

"So, what's on this side?" I inquired.

She looked down the hall. "Your room is the corner, then it's an empty room, then there's my room, two more empty rooms, and then Nee-san's." She stopped to appreciate her kiseru again and I rolled my eyes. "The empty rooms were aired out earlier this year and she never goes near my room, it's a mess, and I doubt she would clean yours out when she tidied it up this morning."

"Ho, you seem confident?"

"Nee-san's nose is horrible, so as long as she can't see I'm fine," Ayame explained.

I chuckled, "If you keep smoking your nose will be as useless as your sister's,"

She waved that warning off. "Do you know what I smell from here? Other than smoke and the shampoo in the third bottle from the far right that you used while at the bath house?"

That made me jump. There had been about twenty glass bottles and she had the right one. "You were peeking," I accused. I didn't care to ask her what else she smelt.

"Ha!" she exclaimed. "That's something only you would do, pervert," she clicked the kiseru against the ash pot, impatiently emptying it of ash. She probably wanted a second go but she turned and tossed the kiseru into her room. She hid the pot of ash underneath the deck again before assuming the same position as me.

"The main plant extracts were from bamboo leaves and chrysanthemum heads," she commented quietly. She was resting her chin on the beam as well, her eyelids drooping slightly. In the sun it was easy to see the purple, bruise like, trim around her eyes. Her paleness only made it more apparent.

"You look tired," I mused.

She stifled a yawn, as though she was just noticing that. "I'm usually asleep right now,"

"Oh? I thought you were an early riser," that was certainly the impression I got from earlier when she came bouncing in to my room.

"I'm usually up all night waiting for an enemy that never comes," she stated tonelessly. "I've been up all day and all night a few times in the past week . . ."

"Why?"

A moment of silence passed and I turned to scowl at her, but her eyes

were closed and her back was slumped. Just like that she had fallen asleep, mouth agape.

"Oi?" I called.

Ayame didn't stir. I thought it near impossible to sleep like that. I wondered if she'd drugged herself.

I startled when I saw a dark haired head turn the corner.

"Good afternoon," Hinata greeted cheerily. "You look better,"

"Good afternoon," I returned, "I feel better,"

She smiled happily and walked over to Ayame, who was still napping. "Goodnight," she whispered. She put a finger to her forehead and pushed her back until she toppled over, amazingly she still didn't wake up. Hinata wrestled with her legs for a minute, struggling to slide them onto the decking.

When she was finished I almost burst out laughing, I even covered my mouth to hold it in, pretending to rub my lips. She hadn't noticed, but one wing of a gem green butterfly was visible from the upturned fold of her yukata.

With a puff she patted off her own robes before disappearing around the corner again. She didn't notice the butterfly or the fact that her sister's appearance had been compromised, but maybe she'd done that on purpose.

I let the suppressed breath out, chest rumbling quietly. That woman really wasn't very perspective.

* * *

><p>Anyways, review please :D I see you visiting o.O and viewing multiple chapters e.e so review D: or I'll be mad. I won't actually be ^^ it's just nice to know people are reading :D

7. The three way seal

Please review :D I'll love you forever! I'll be updating at least once a week, on Wednesdays, so don't forget! :D

Also, thank you desirae668 for reviewing last chapter :D I'm glad you enjoyed reading it ^^

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 7: The three-way-seal.

I startled awake, not quite sure how long I'd been asleep. It was strangely quiet.

"Chizuru, why are you here?"

"Kazama-san! Are you alright? Should you be up?"

I shot up, head spinning. I thought Nee-san told her to stay on the east side with Hijikata?

I was partially annoyed to see her wearing one of my favorite kimonos, a dark blue with koi fish and water lilies. Her hair was tied in a low ponytail with a white cord borrowed from Nee-san.

"Something the matter?" I interrupted. Kazama's gaze snapped to me and I absentmindedly fixed my yukata. I couldn't remember when I'd decided to lie down for a nap.

"Hinata-sama told me to come get you," Chizuru responded. She sounded like the type to be overly formal.

I yawned and rubbed the sandy grains from my eyes. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"The preparation for the three-way-seal is finished . . . ?" Chizuru sounded uncertain.

I felt like going back to sleep. "Seriously?" I whined. "That's selfish of her; she should have picked an easier one,"

Kazama was looking back and forth between us with a stony glare. Actually, I was the only one being glared at. His expression was softer when he looked at Chizuru, though maybe a little strained.

I wondered, not for the first time, what their relationship was. She seemed to be Hijikata's lover, though she definitely felt concern for Kazama when I brought him back.

"Ano, what is a three-way-seal?" Chizuru asked; her small mouth in a worried line.

I stood up, stretching. "It's a seal that targets the mind, the body, and the soul." That was barely an explanation so I continued. "She intends to completely prevent the Rasetsu transformation from ever surfacing by sealing off the pathways it uses to manifest itself."

"Oi, Hakuouki is here?" Kazama interjected.

Chizuru nodded.

"He's in worse shape than you, despite being the victor," I added. "His wounds aren't healing quickly like yours, though I guess he is just a human,"

Kazama snarled at me, "What do you know? You're just a half Oni,"

I recoiled. I was used to him being rude but I didn't expect him to be so callous. "Anyways, if Nee-san is ready to seal the power that's eating away at him, I'll be glad to offer my assistance,"

Chizuru's face brightened, relieved to hear that. "Thank you very much!"

I jumped off the open hallway and grounded myself next to her. "She told you the three-way-seal needs three people to cast it, right?"

"Yes, I'll help in any way I can,"

Kazama made to stand up and I scowled at him. "Stay here, you'll only get in the way,"

"What did you say!" he roared, pulling himself up with the railing.

"Tch," I turned to address the woods. "Kouta, I know you're there, damn fox!" the bushes rattled and I pointed at Kazama behind me. "Keep him busy and I'll give you a jug of sake,"

Kouta, the fox demon, popped up. He was half transformed with high fox ears and a snout that was retreating into his face. "Ehhh? Give me ten and it's a deal,"

"Five,"

"Ehh, it's not worth it if I get beat to a pulp," he complained.

I snorted. "He's too injured to throw a punch, just make sure he stays where he's at."

"Yes, yes," he emerged from the woods, completely human. He wore a white kimono speckled with soft pink cherry blossoms. His freed shoulder length malt hair almost gave him a feminine appearance, if not for his strong, pointed, nose. "Whatever you wish, Oni-sama."

"Let's go, Chizuru,"

"Oi, where are you going?" Kazama spat after us, limping to the steps.

Kouta blew into the palm of his hand and kitsune-bi lit the garden.

"Don't burn anything!" I exclaimed before turning the corner.

Kouta was a nuisance but he'd been a sort of playmate and friend since the first time we'd met. He was playful and sometimes let his pranks get out of hand but he never intentionally hurt anybody. I could trust him to keep Kazama under control and not aggravate his wound.

Probably.

* * *

><p>Hijikata's room was slightly bigger than Kazama's and had an unpleasant smell, as though Hijikata was already half dead. Nee-san giggled when she saw our flushed faces.<p>

"I was hoping he'd have gone back to his room," she lied.

"You could have gone yourself," I grumbled. Of course, Nee-san

probably thought it was more interesting this way. She sometimes did cruel things. I think being the land god went to her head.

Hijikata was fitfully asleep on his futon, sweat rolling off his brow. His wounds were bad but even a normal human should have begun to recover. They were only flesh wounds and the mark on his back had already healed. It looked to me as though only the sword wounds weren't healing.

"I don't get it," I voiced, "the other wound healed and he's technically an Oni right now, so why aren't the rest healing?"

Nee-san appraised me. "You have Kazama-san's sword, don't you? Didn't he tell you what it was?"

I looked down at the red sheathed sword curiously.

"It's the Oni slaying blade, Douji-giri Yasutsuna." Nee-san leveled her gaze with mine. "There were other ways to make Hijikata's Rasetsu transformation more manageable; however, the wounds won't heal in time if we leave him as one. By completely sealing those powers, the wounds will heal faster. He'll be a human again and the sword will have no affect on him."

"Oh . . ."

"Chizuru, stand here and let this scroll drop open after Ayame does the same," Hinata-onee-san instructed, gently leading her to her position.

A triangle drawn in blood soaked ink was already prepared and I frowned at my sister. "I could have done that part,"

In the fading afternoon light she looked extremely white. Nee-san's body had always been weak and losing even a small amount of blood meant she'd be recovering for days.

I took my post on one of the lower corners and Nee-san took hers at the top. She held a scroll as well.

"I've modified it so that no words have to be spoken for Chizuru-chan's sake since it takes a while to get a grasp of the meaning. The words are in the scroll so you just have to let it open," Nee-san informed. "Ready now? One after the other,"

Chizuru tensed as Nee-san let the first scroll spill open. It hit the floor with an oddly hollow sound that echoed in the air around us. Symbols written with blood came to life and began to hop off the page. I let mine do the same and the paper grew warm in my hands as the words followed the other ones onto the triangle. Chizuru gasped as the paper grew hot in her hands but diligently held on.

"Let go and step back," Nee-san commanded.

We both listened to her. Nee-san was frightfully serious without a smile stretching her pink lips.

The three-way-seal was somewhat familiar to me, though this was actually my first time ever participating in a sealing. I ground my

teeth, I was getting a vibe of nostalgia, as though it was something I was supposed to know.

The triangle began to glow and I caught Nee-san's eyes on me, like she was watching for the recognition I was feeling. Kazama's words filled my head, _"She remembers something you can't. You two are sisters but you're on opposite sides of the spectrum. It might be wise of you to be considerate of her feelings,"_

What did she remember that I didn't? Why did she sometimes look at me as though I were someone completely different? Weren't our feelings the same?

The glow shrank, situating itself on the center of Hijikata's chest. It appeared to sink into his flesh and he convulsed, his midnight hair drained of its color and his eyes flared. The glowing red dimmed and returned to subdued violet, followed by the restoration of his original hair color.

Hijikata sighed and returned to sleeping, peacefully, as though a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

Chizuru knelt at his side, delicately cupping his cheek in her small hand. "Is he alright now?"

"He's better," Nee-san replied. "I can't reverse the damage that was already done but at least his life force won't be sapped away anymore,"

"Thank you very much . . . truly, thank you very much!" Chizuru cried, tears of relief filling her deep brown eyes.

I felt awkward standing there, watching her back tremble from the effort it took her to keep her emotions in check. "I'll go make sure Kazama and Kouta haven't killed each other, accidentally or otherwise,"

"Say 'hi' to Kouta-chan for me,"

* * *

><p>When I turned the corner I was relieved to find that nothing was burned, though Kazama and Kouta were in some type of stalemate.<p>

"Let go, you're brâ€eaking! My neck! My neck!" Kouta choked. Kazama had his good arm (his left arm wasn't very flexible at the moment) locked around Kouta's neck so tightly that Kouta's face was beginning to turn purple.

"Untie my legs first," he panted, struggling to keep Kouta still with his compromised strength. Kazama's legs were winded together with the branches of a tree sprouting from the woodwork.

"Good work; you can untie his legs now, Kouta,"

Kouta disappeared in a puff of smoke and the binding around Kazama's legs vanished.

"Brute!" Kouta insulted from the safety of the forest. "I want twenty

jugs of sake for that, Aka-oni-sama!"

"Ten and a meal," I shouted back.

I turned my attention back to Kazama, who was nursing his sore legs. The collar of his yukata was wide open and there was a trail of blood from the wound on his chest. I felt springy and nervous. He wasn't even looking at me and I could feel the distain he was emitting.

I bounded over the small flowerbed and perched on the deck railing, inspecting the wound. "You ripped a stitch," I diagnosed. He glowered at me and I hopped down before he could push me off the rail.

I slid the shoji door open to his room and gestured for him to follow.

"You knew?" he started, softly.

"I did," I confessed.

"And you knew that there was a connection between the three of us?"

"Chizuru was there when I brought you in."

He exhaled deeply, following me in. No one had folded his futon up so he sat on it heavily. "For what reason did you keep it from me? Did you think I would do something rash?"

There was a lamp in the corner next to the medical supplies and I lit it. The sun was already beginning to sink over the horizon.

"I was worried that you'd cause trouble or hurt yourself," I admitted.

He huffed, maneuvering out of the arms of the yukata with some difficulty. He hadn't gotten any blood on the yukata itself, which was good. The base color was beige, just slightly darker and browner than his hair.

I brought the whole bucket of supplies over, too lazy to sort through it. I dumped it next to the head of his futon, glancing at his toned back as I did. Another two stitches to replace. "You shouldn't have struggled,"

"And what, let the fox think he could easily overpower an Oni? I don't think so," Kazama scoffed.

"He saw that you were injured," I reminded him. "That and he's used to being pounded to a pulp by a half Oni."

He chuckled dryly at that.

The blood on his chest was already clotting but the wound on his back was split open and wasn't healing quickly. I caught the blood on his back with my hand before it could run further and popped the wound remedy canister open with my teeth. I liberally applied it to the wound, slowing the flow significantly with the thick cream.

"I noticed the other day that the surface wounds weren't healing,

only clotting. I guess the internal damage is taken care of before the surface damage. That's probably unique to Oni since everything else seals the surface before it has time to deal with deeper wounds." I didn't know if he was listening. "I think the majority of your accelerated healing is being directed where the damage is most severe,"

"You sound like a doctor, or a scholar. When did you become so interested?"

I was astonished he'd even bothered to reply. I removed my hand from his back, a little reluctantly, and wiped it on a handkerchief. His gaze widened at the amount of blood I had let pool in my hand, whether because he thought he wasn't bleeding as badly or because I didn't appear daunted by it. I'd never be disconcerted by blood again, not after I carried him from the foot of mountain to the temple.

"Kouta is a real softy. He sees injured animals, and people too, and brings them to me, begging me to do something about it. I literally put his face in the dirt the first time we met and he used to revere me as a higher authority. If he had a problem, he came to me." I giggled, wiping the tear that'd formed in the corner of my eye. "Nee-san and Takeshi-sama usually dealt with it for me since I couldn't say no and I guess they got fed up. They started piling books about anatomy and medicine in my room and once I got started I couldn't stop."

I stood up with the bucket under one arm, darting out to the well and back, which hardly took a moment with the god like speed I possessed.

"That's called pseudo teleportation," Kazama commented.

"Sounds fancy," I licked my lips, "if I had to call it something I think I'd call it 'skipping'."

He rumbled quietly, "Why do you make everything sound so stupid?"

"That's mean," I chided. I was mostly forgiven by now. Kazama didn't seem to hold grudges against girls for very long.

I wet a fresh cloth and wiped the blood off his chest before plucking the torn stitch. He hissed softly.

"Don't look if you get dizzy. You don't want me to accidentally prick you with this," I warned as I threaded the curved needle.

He obeyed, rolling his head back to stare at the ceiling. I bit back a smirk. He was such a baby. He held back another hiss of pain.

"Sorry, I should have used an anesthetic," but I was impatient and figured he could handle it. It wasn't that bad.

"No problem," he breathed.

"You won't notice it as much when I do your back, thanks to the iris root cream," I comforted.

"Yeah, yeah,"

"Done," I snipped the thread with scissors and lightly applied the cream to soothe the pain from the needle. The small pricks probably hurt more than the wound. "You can lie on your stomach while I do your back,"

He complied and I gently rubbed the excess jelly off with the wet towel. I leaned over him and started by pulling the broken stitches.

"I remember coming to for a moment when you were stitching me up the first time," Kazama mentioned, voiced muffled slightly. "You sat on my back," he accused.

"I thought you might have been conscious, though you were still completely out of it. What exactly were you trying to prove by struggling?"

He was silent as I pulled the first stitch tight. I snipped the stitch and he shifted slightly.

"You bit the string that time,"

"I couldn't find the scissors," I defended, "I was in a hurry too,"

"Your hand was wet. From my blood?" he asked.

"Yup."

"I thought I had died when Hakuouki stabbed me." He seemed to pick his words carefully, slowly speaking as he usually did. "I thought I was dead when you found me," his impassive voice quivered just slightly when he continued, "and I thought I was going to die when I found myself here, unable to muster the strength to even open my eyes and keep them like that."

"Miraculously, you find yourself alive and even conversing with me," I finished. Honestly, I thought he wouldn't make it either that first day. "You're made of tough stuff," I snipped the last stitch and cleaned the site of oozing blood before smoothing on more cream.

It was an odd sight, him laying with his back bare to me, face in a pillow. Kazama didn't strike me as the type to let himself be ordered around quietly. Maybe he trusted me?

I scrubbed my hands in the bucket of water, checking my nails twice. I tossed the bloodied cloths in the water to loosen the stains and went about returning the supplies to the corner of the room.

"Oho? You're actually tidying up after yourself?" he teased, resting his chin on his arm.

"It can't be helped, I've got nothing else to do," I retorted.

A cool breeze blew around the shoji door, a lingering touch of spring.

"The moon will be full in a few days time, want to drink sake with me then?"

He chortled, "You drink too? Why am I not surprised?" he paused for a humorous effect. "Does your sister know?"

I laughed and picked the bucket up to bring to the laundry. "She knows I drink, only because Takeshi-sama's the one who introduced me to sake,"

He snorted at that. "What is Takeshi-sama to you?"

I didn't really have to even think about that. He wasn't just one thing, he was everything. "He's our savior, our caretaker, our master, our teacher, our employer, and our father figure." I was tempted to add 'drinking buddy' but it would have ruined the mood.

"Ho, he means that much to you two?"

"We'd be dead without him, so of course we see him in an unwavering light." I confirmed.

He nodded, sitting up to feed his arms back into the yukata.

"You should get some rest, you'll heal quicker that way," I stepped outside, hand on the door.

"You're not going to sleep," he guessed.

"Uh-m, I'm going on patrol,"

"Don't be out late; I'm expecting you to bother me tomorrow too,"

I cackled at that, it was heartening to know he cared.

* * *

><p>You guys should take the time to go back through all the chapters and review them all l:D just kidding x3 though it'd be nice if you reviewed everytime a new chapter comes out l:P

8. The girl like a sparrow

Review, my minions \o()o/ please :D?

Thanks to desirae668 for reviewing again :D love you! It's not what she found, but rather what she didn't find ;D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 8: The girl like a sparrow.

I thought I'd stay awake for a while after she left, though lying in bed made it impossible. I woke up the next morning without knowing just how late she had stayed out wandering through the woods.

It was pretty obvious that she had instability in her mind, caused by the distress in her childhood. I wondered if she'd ever solve it.

The fact that I had woken up on my own, without anyone poking or prodding me, laughing loudly, or throwing the shoji door open with a bang, meant that Ayame was still sleeping.

Breakfast was permeating the air and my stomach rumbled. I had three meals yesterday, two while Ayame was sleeping. I could only guess how hungry she was, unless she'd eaten during the night. Her unusual sleeping pattern was probably the reason she hadn't grown any taller. Hinata's stature suggested she should have been much taller.

I heard soft padding in the hallway, too soft to belong to either Miyaki.

"Kazama-san, are you awake?" Chizuru's soft, feminine, voice. Neither Miyaki was very ladylike, they couldn't compare to the charm of an Edo woman.

"I'm awake," I replied. Miyaki Hinata had her running around like a servant. That woman reminded me of a weasel.

Chizuru's silhouette knelt in the shoji screen, laying the food tray next to her as she quietly slid the door open. Chizuru certainly had a firm hold on her manners.

"Good morning, Kazama-san," she greeted, "is Miyaki-san awake yet?"

"Doesn't seem like it," I answered, sitting up stiffly. My body was still giving me trouble.

"I brought her food too," she deliberated what to do silently. "Hinata-sama told me she doesn't sleep well."

"I wouldn't worry about her, she sleeps pretty well sometimes."

She gave me a curious look, "Should I call her up then?"

"Sure, you might have to yell or slam the door though." I wasn't quite childish enough to do it myself.

Chizuru brought my food inside before walking down the hall to Ayame's room.

I threw myself out of bed, eagerly stepping halfway out of my room, waiting to see Ayame's reaction. A couple rebellious stars danced in my vision.

"Miyaki-san?" Chizuru called, but no response came. She called again, louder, but nothing happened. She looked back at me and I shrugged.

She opened the door an inch, fitting her small hands into the crack for leverage. Chizuru threw open the door with smooth force, the wooden clack loud enough to wake even the dead.

There were a few choice swearwords, some that didn't even make sense,

then there was rustling as she struggled out of her futon. Chizuru's shoulders shrank and she smiled nervously, a moment later Ayame poked her head out, her hair resembling seaweed in color and shape. I bit back a roar of laughter.

She glared at me, dark circles under her eyes that accented the honey gold disks in her eyes, made more apparent by the shrunken size of her pupils. "You," she growled, upper lip twitching to reveal her canines.

"Good morning, you look energetic," my voice was laced with insincerity.

Chizuru stole a look between us, nervous smile still in place. "Your food . . . I brought your food," she whispered, trying to soothe the scratchy atmosphere.

With one last simmering glance at me she looked up at Chizuru. "That man is a venomous snake with the temperament of a boar. If he ever, ever, tells you to wake me up again, dump tea in his lap."

Chizuru laughed uneasily, "I'll go get your food, that I left over there," she made to move but Ayame interrupted her.

"Leave it!" she snapped, "I'll get it myself when I feel like looking at his ugly face again,"

"Right!" Chizuru bowed deeply before hurriedly walking towards the steps. She all but jumped into her shoes, desperate to get back to the east wing and Hakuouki. That was almost an appealing idea when I met Ayame's boiling gaze again.

I dared her to come at me; I was feeling close to normal again. I figured it'd be weeks before I actually felt a hundred percent better though. "Your breakfast is getting cold," I informed her.

"Don't want it," she muttered and rolled over, leaving her back to me.

A moment passed and I guessed she was back asleep. I chuckled; she hadn't even bothered to go back to her futon. It appeared she could sleep anywhere when she stayed awake for long enough.

* * *

><p>Hours passed as I waited for her to wake up, bored out of my mind with no one to talk to, nothing to do, and nowhere to go.<p>

Hinata had come by to get the dishes earlier and decided to leave Ayame's there for her, no matter how cold it got. That was only fair after giving Chizuru a 'fright', she reasoned.

"Look!" I heard someone, or something, hiss fiercely in the bush. "She's sleeping, sleeping soundly,"

"That's the Oni girl with the tasty blood?" a deep but womanly voice. She didn't bother to speak quietly.

"Yes, there's no mistake. We're lucky; the older one is resting and the barrier is weakened."

The elder Miyaki? Ayame hadn't mentioned that her sister was ill or injured.

"Who is the man?"

"Pay him no mind, he is injured."

I bristled at that. They hardly sounded like they knew what they were doing, speaking loudly from the bushes.

"Who's there?" I shouted, my intentions clearly hostile. I stood up quickly, feeling just a bit naked without my katana.

Ayame didn't stir, even though the air was electrified with tension.

A grotesque form shot from the woods, an ugly misshapen woman attached to the body of a spider. Her lips were stretched wide and thin with pinchers dripping poison. I'd never seen a demon with a true form like that before.

She wasn't charging at me, choosing to ignore me and go straight for Ayame's prone form. Could I cover the distance in time?

It didn't matter, I'd forgotten about the other presence. A tall, gangly, body crashed into me, knocking me over. A black haired fox hovered over me, pinning my arms with just his strength. His eyes were narrow, a crescent of white and black showing.

I twisted, a stitch tugging painfully. I caught a glimpse of the spider diving towards her; in an instant she'd have Ayame's neck.

I blinked, and then blinked back my surprise. Ayame had disappeared. A second passed and the spider monster's body stiffened. The shoji screens burst from their hinges, splintering everywhere and momentarily blinding the spider.

Like an arrow, Ayame sailed through the air, the Imperial Chrysanthemum drawn. With one powerful thrust she slashed the blade through the woman's torso, blade sailing easily through bone and flesh. A spray of blood splattered the nearby walls, though most painted Ayame's skin and clothes scarlet.

She appeared before us, green-black hair fanned out, her yellow eyes incandescent. "Move," she commanded, her voice colder than I'd ever heard.

The fox demon submitted, trembling as he got off my chest, backing away slowly. His legs shook and he tensed, fight or flight. He angled himself towards the woods.

Before he could spring, Ayame stepped in. She swung her blade deftly, opening a deep, gaping, wound in his side. He fell to the ground, still, as though the pain didn't have time to catch up. He bled out in seconds.

"You're bleeding,"

I wasn't sure who she was addressing, me or the dead fox who's blood

was dripping into the flowerbed from the ledge of the decking. I checked my chest, but there was no blood. I felt my chin and realized I'd scuffed it when I was jumped. The wound itself had already healed, just a print of blood left. I rubbed it off.

"It's fine,"

She was looking off in the distance, her eyes no longer glowing angrily, eerily. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. Was it her first time killing? It didn't seem like it based on the precise cuts she had made. She was versed in anatomy, I argued to myself. But the willingness to kill, the readiness, that didn't seem new.

Footsteps rounded the corner but she ignored them, staring off.

"Ayame!" Hinata cried, concern deeply etched onto her face. She was being supported by Chizuru.

Chizuru gazed frightfully at the monster spider, eyes almost popping out of her head. I wasn't the only one seeing such a beast for the first time.

"Ayame!" Hinata repeated, more desperately this time. I saw fear in her usually warm and inviting, brown, eyes.

She seemed to come out of her trance, flicking the blood off her katana with a practiced, experienced, swing. The sound of it locking in its sheathe seemed to relieve Hinata.

I had misunderstood Ayame. I'd thought all along that she was just a brat who flaunted her strength and her sword without actually ever wetting the blade. When she'd wielded the sword for a fleeting minute, she had shown ever ounce of discipline that a seasoned warrior should exert. Hesitation didn't dull her blade and neither did she show compassion to her enemy.

"I'm sorry, I broke the shoji doors," she apologized.

That hardly seemed to matter at the moment.

"Did you tear any stitches?"

"No, "

"That's good, I want a bath." The front of her yukata was splashed with dark blood from the spider; the stain would probably never lift.

Hinata straightened up, "That's fine. Chizuru will bring you a change of clothes,"

Ayame slid the Imperial Chrysanthemum into her sash and then stalked off without another word.

"Let's clean up," Hinata proposed.

I stood up, brushing myself off. Amazingly, not a drop of blood had gotten on me.

Cleaning would have taken a long time with just the three of us. Hinata could barely stand for whatever reason.

She made herself useful by demonstrating her ability as land god, summoning strange white, formless, creatures with masks labeled 'Taro' and 'Maru'. They were quickly able to cart away the corpses, even the enormous spider woman.

I worked with Chizuru, carrying water from the well to wash the blood away and helped replace the ruined washi paper.

There were no replacements for the screens Ayame had wrecked and they were broken in too many pieces to repair. Hinata settled with lowering the bamboo blinds and moving her into the room next to mine.

"Chizuru-chan, can you bring Ayame-chan a robe?" Hinata asked. She was sitting quietly out of the way while her shiki did the work. "Anything lying around her room is fine,"

Chizuru nodded, slipping inside.

There was a crash and I figured she had stepped on something, or bumped into something. Ayame had said that her room was messy.

A couple seconds later Chizuru returned, sweeping the bamboo blind over her shoulder. She had a neatly folded purple kimono in one arm and the other nursing her forehead.

The bamboo blind swung a bit, dragging Ayame's kiseru onto the deck. Discretely, I poked it back with one foot.

"I already know about that," Hinata breathed. She didn't meet my gaze, embarrassed or guilty, maybe both.

There wasn't anything else to be done so I took a seat next to her.

"What do you want to know?" she sounded resigned. "I'll disclose anything,"

"That wasn't the first time she killed,"

Hinata sighed, "No, it's not the first. However, it's the first time she'll remember killing."

"Explain," I demanded.

"She's told you her memories are incomplete?" she inquired.

"She has,"

"The extent of which her memories are corrupted is probably greater than she implied. She doesn't even know how many days she's missing." She took a deep, quaky, breath. "To start, she's missing her memory of the incident nine years ago, the following two months, and every encounter with the Oni of the South leading up to the death of our parents.

"I was twelve when our parents were murdered. I knew what was

happening and I knew that we had to run. Ayame was six and couldn't possibly comprehend the situation. We managed to get away but it was as though she left her mind behind. She wouldn't eat, she wouldn't sleep, she wouldn't talk . . . she wouldn't even look at me.

"Two months passed and we were both starving. We wandered into the North of Japan but it was still terribly hot. Whatever strength I had was stolen and I couldn't even conjure the will to force gruel down her throat. I thought we'd both die of starvation under the heat of a cruel sun. The next day, at the foot of this mountain, Takeshi-sama found us and took us in.

"He asked me before he sealed her memories, though he would have done it even if I had refused."

I interrupted. "Her memories are sealed?"

She held up her hand, ordering me to be silent. "The memories of that incident are sealed. After he sealed them, it was like none of it had ever happened. I buried my memories and told her our parents had always been dead whenever she asked about them. It was easy to persuade her into believing we had always been taken care of by Takeshi-sama.

"For a while it worked, but the magic wore loose and she began to uncover memories of times when we were still a family of four. She hated me for hiding it and even more when I refused to tell her exactly what had happened.

"Four years later Takeshi-sama gave me the responsibility of tending to the wounded and sick in the villages of his land. I took Ayame with me since I had to keep her in my sight. If I let her wander off by herself she'd go drinking with Kouta's aniki or fall asleep somewhere outside,"

I tried not to laugh, though my upturned lips made her glare at me.

"We were in a village where Oni of the North frequented. I was used to going there while Takeshi-sama watched over Ayame but he was busy and I had to take her with me. I took for granted that the Oni were either unaware of me or just uninterested. Ayame is . . . more Oni-like than me. It was obvious to the humans and the Oni that she was something more.

"We were surrounded in the mountain pass when we left the village."

She paused, hesitant to dredge up such memories.

"Before our parents died, Chichiue would teach her how to wield the sword. She knew the moves, though she obviously wasn't so practiced. Chichiue grew up as a warrior so it was a joy for him to be able to pass his skill on. I was weak and, honestly, talentless. After her memory was sealed she continued to practice her sword swings, despite her mind being in such disarray. Takeshi-sama thought it was mysterious, that she should remember how to swing a sword of all things. She couldn't even remember how to hold chopsticks at first!

"Anyways, I had summoned a shikigami and sent it to warn Takeshi-sama. My shikigami back then were invisible to most and weak, I couldn't have fought against them. I hoped Takeshi-sama would be able to rescue us, even if he couldn't make it in time.

"Ayame, however, didn't notice and drew her sword. It was a cheap blade that she'd bought with her allowance. The Oni laughed at her display of pigheadedness and advanced. I remember my heart beating like the wings of a trapped bird inside my chest. It was like watching our parent's death again, only we were the ones about to be captured. I think the similarity caused the seal to weaken.

"She was . . . very much like an Oni. At first, I was relieved she was even able to deflect the blade that swung at her but in a moment she was overpowering the Oni who should have been so much stronger than her. He didn't reveal his true form, probably too proud to admit a little girl Oni, half Oni, was able to beat him. He was slow and she cut completely through his arm.

"The blood set her off and once she started she couldn't be stopped. It didn't matter if they showed their true forms, attacked her together, or even when they used me as a hostage. Her sword snapped when three were left and she still managed to fell them. When I was the last one left alive, she turned on me." Hinata rolled up the sleeve of her right arm, showing a deep and lasting white scar from her elbow to her wrist. It surprised me that an Oni, even a half Oni, could be scarred. She lowered her sleeve and continued. "Ayame doesn't know about that scar, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell her either.

"Takeshi-sama arrived before she could swing at me again. If her sword hadn't been broken I would have easily lost my arm. The sharp edge had mostly fallen away, leaving just the blunt backside. He restrained her and made her sleep with a spell. When she woke up the next day she was like she had been before.

"I was so scared, afraid that I was going to lose her for good. Takeshi-sama couldn't seal her memories again; adding more layers to the seal would have strained her already frail mind and could have even killed her.

"But a week later, she came out of it on her own. She couldn't remember anything that had happened in the last month. It was like she had clumsily sealed her own memories. I interrogated her afterwards until I knew the exact amount of days she had forgotten: thirty-four days.

"That might sound random to you, but less than a year later it happened again. This time it was simple thieves with big attitudes and stolen swords. I was still recovering from my wound and the barrier was weakened, much as it was today. The bandits wandered up the mountain when they saw the steam rising in the winter night from our onsen.

"I don't know exactly what happened, though I suspect she might have been taunting them. When I arrived after hearing their screams she'd already dispatched them. She didn't even have a sword.

"I'd always thought sword wounds were disgusting and morbid, but their twisted necks and broken bones still haunt my dreams to this

day.

"I called out to her but she didn't respond. I was half afraid she was going to attack me again and when she turned slowly towards me I wanted to run, but my legs were locked in place. Like today, she started to apologize for random things that hardly seemed to matter. She was talking about things she'd done to make me mad weeks ago. Before I had time to say anything back she fainted. When she woke up the next day she had forgotten the past thirty-four days."

She was silent, her story was finished.

"She's been fine since then?"

"Yes. I gave her Father's sword and she's been more responsible."

I nodded. "You were afraid earlier, because of your sister or because you were afraid she was going to relapse?"

She hung her head, ashamed. "I wish I could say just the later, but I was undeniably afraid she was going to turn on me or you or Chizuru-chan. If anybody, I figured she would have turned on you,"

I frowned. "Why?"

"Your hair is light, not very far from white; I was afraid she might have completely mistaken it for white and decided to attack you. Her instincts were clearly raw, untamed and completely in control of her mind."

"Do you think she might relapse?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "She seemed more grounded in reality than before."

Hinata noticed Chizuru coming from the path to the hot springs and impatiently waved her over before she turned towards the east wing.

"Is Ayame-chan alright?" she questioned.

"I think she's just shaken up," Chizuru mumbled. Chizuru was clearly still feeling restless. "She was crying,"

Hinata jolted, "Crying?" she returned.

"Yes," Chizuru looked uncomfortable. "She wouldn't let me stay,"

"That's alright, Chizuru-chan. You should go back to Hijikata-san."

Chizuru bowed and then trotted off, a worried expression tacked to her face.

"I haven't seen Ayame cry since before our parents died," she commented, she chewed her thumbnail indecisively. "Anyways, I'm going to go reinforce the barrier to make sure something like this doesn't happen twice in the same day. If she's not back from the bath house in an hour go ask Chizuru to check on her again,"

"Alright,"

* * *

><p>Ayame was back in less than an hour, which was a relief. I had found myself worrying that she might have blacked out in the bath.<p>

Her appearance was even sloppier than usual; her long wet hair almost trailing on the ground behind her as she dragged her feet. Even the scowl she usually expressed was gone.

She was wearing a kimono for once. The material was clearly expensive and was dyed a deep purple with a print of bright orange and yellow flowers. The matching obi was tied at the front instead of the back, giving her the look of being barely held together in more ways than one.

She walked straight towards me, ignoring the steps all together. Her shoes were still there and I realized she'd been barefoot the entire time. She jumped, clearing the wooden post by a hair.

"You're tracking filth in," I scolded.

"Don't care," she muttered and sat down next to me. Collapsed might have described it better.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm not," she replied.

Something had changed in her demeanor. Before she had been light and free like a sparrow, now it was like an intense, looming, storm cloud hovered above her.

"You're rattled, was that your first time killing?" I ventured. I already knew it wasn't, but I felt like I could dampen her fear by asking.

"I . . . don't know. It didn't feel like it, or rather, it didn't even feel like me." She crinkled her toes against the bare wood, almost drawing marks with her nails.

"It didn't look like your first," I provided.

She began to shiver, her teeth chattering. It was the middle of the day, she couldn't possibly be cold.

"I was asleep. I didn't have the slightest clue what was going on but then Iâ€"I smelt your blood and it was like everything got pushed into perspective." She glanced at me, her eyes wide, terrified. "Danger . . . that was the one thought, no, feeling that filled my head as I felt myself move, like a puppet attached to strings. It felt so disgusting,"

She rambled. She needed to, it was probably the only way she could put her thoughts in order.

"At first I thought I was in control. I knew exactly where my sword

was and I knew I could get to in time and I knew I could beat her . . . but all that faded away and it was like a dream, without reason, impulsion over thought." She choked back a sob, "I wanted to stop. I told myself I had to ask them why they were there, but it was weak and I admitted that I just didn't want to kill them. I didn't want to kill them but I couldn't stop. I was scared, I felt like I was trapped in my own body. I couldn't think straight, everything was a blur. Part of me was excited," she buried her face in her knees. "That kitsune, he was the one I told you about, the one with the tanuki friend. I thought I was going to let him go but when he tensed to flee I lost track of my thoughts again. I felt so numb,"

My hand froze over her back. I'd been about to rub her shoulders without even realizing, too immersed in her account. I planted it on the floor, firmly leaning on it. "You had just woken up; it was probably a subconscious reaction,"

"Kazama, I know my memories aren't perfect, but that definitely wasn't my first time . . . killing." She shrank, squeezing herself into a tight ball. "That out of control, instinctual, sword style wasn't mine, my father's, or even a combination of both."

"I'm afraid, afraid of myself. I feel like I'm losing my mind."

Ayame had never seemed vulnerable to me before. I'd always thought of her as headstrong and just a little bit dumb. But now she was shaken to the core, cracks appearing in her suit of armor.

I didn't stop myself from patting her shoulder this time. She'd saved me once before, and again today. I was angry at myself for being so useless and for misunderstanding her twice.

Her small, boney, shoulders trembled under my touch. I didn't know how to calm her so I settled for rubbing circles softly across her back.

It seemed to have the opposite effect. Ayame's breath caught and her throat let a cry past. Tears rolled down the fabric of her kimono, leaving dark trails. "I'm so pathetic, crying over something I can't even remember," she hiccupped. "I don't get it, I thought I wanted to know what happened in the past but after today it's like I'm the one trying to forget it. Everything's become so hazy and the only thing I can remember clearly is the smell of blood,"

She looked up, her eyes red rimmed. Her eyelids were drooping like she was tired, about to fall asleep. Her eyes were distant and dull.

"Don't forget," I dictated.

Ayame sniffled, some of her former will returning. "Thank you,"

"What for?" I mumbled; hand still awkwardly on her back.

"For listening," she swept her tears away and straightened. I retracted my arm, resting it in my lap. "I'll definitely find out what happened in the past, on my own if I have too." Her eyes shone with determination, her gaze straightforward and honest.

Her mind seemed to be made up and balance had been restored. Maybe I had contributed to her recovery. I found myself wondering if she would have broken again if I hadn't been here.

* * *

><p>I didn't really like the dialogue towards the end :P seemed a bit clippy and I'm not used to Ayame being so frightened. She's more the type to be restless rather than full blown shaking to pieces.

I think Kazama's still within his range, since he's actually pretty understanding once you get past his stubborn side. That's the feeling I got from his route at least, and from the second season.

Anyways, please review :D

9. The tattoo needle

**Shakki is the sound a needle supposedly makes in traditional Japanese tattooing. Ayame sure likes to make Kazama uncomfortable xD **

**Review please :D **

And thanks again to desirae668 :D Thank you so much for your continued support and the supper chocolate brownie! :D you won't have to wait long ;D

Also, another chapter comes out on Saturday to celebrate the one month mark :D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 9: The tattoo needle.

The next few days passed without much incidence. I slept less than usual and barely touched my food. Kazama seemed like the only person who noticed, which wasn't unexpected.

Our rooms were side by side, I couldn't get up without him realizing. He was an extremely light sleeper and he always made sure to wake me when he got up.

"If I keep you awake during the day you'll sleep during the night," he reasoned.

That sounded pretty logical, for a normal person. For me, it didn't matter how sleepy I was, I couldn't sleep deeply until the sun was up.

Why did Nee-san put me in the room next to him?

Kazama's company kept me from brooding too much and I gradually got used to the memory of killing. The haziness that had surrounded it

lifted, like a morning fog. The memory was mine now, even if it didn't rightfully belong to 'me'.

I wondered if I could make the memories of the past return to me somehow, or if they were locked for good when I forgot them in the first place.

Occasionally I'd catch Kazama watching me silently, whether it was while I practiced with my katana or while I tended to his wounds.

Actually, when he caught me practicing one evening he looked wholly unimpressed.

"What are you doing?" he questioned, his low voice startling me. I hadn't even realized he was standing outside his room.

"I'm practicing," I answered. Had he come out to check on me?

"Why? Why at this hour?"

"Because I just got up from a nap and I haven't practiced since you arrived," I also needed something to calm my mind after dreaming about the puddle of blood from the other day. I wanted to be able to control myself the next time something like that happened.

It was almost as though he knew what I was thinking about, or maybe he'd just coincidentally thought about it at the same time. "You mentioned that the sword style you used the other day wasn't yours or your father's. Do sword style's really matter that much?"

"Do you know why I wear my hair so long?" I asked.

"What has that got to do with sword styles?" he returned.

"I haven't cut my hair since the day I was born, because I was born to be the successor of my father's clan." I watched his frown deepen. "The Agano clan is made of ten different families. Each family has a head and their own number of students who each learn their own particular sword style. Those who learn the way of the sword in Agano's village don't have to even be directly related, they only have to protect their hair.

"When the head is ready to step down or is challenged the successor must either beat the head with the head's sword style or with their own unique style. After they've become the head, the sword style of the family changes and the previous head cuts his hair.

"The head-head, the leader of all of Agano, does not have to be born of the Agano family or even one of the other nine families. The requirement for becoming head of the Agano is creating a sword style that dominates all the others. But before anyone can try to become the head they have to have at least three shaku of hair,"

Kazama weighed that carefully. "I don't understand why hair is such a big deal, but your father's style is one that dominated all the others and the previous Agano's?"

"Correct. My father was the sixth son of the Agano family. The head at the time was another young man who was part of the Sakurano clan

before he took over the Agano family. My uncles had all tried to create their own style but were unsuccessful in beating him. Chichiue tried despite preferring to wander. He thought he'd give it a go just because his elder brothers had and didn't even expect to win.

"Since my father died the previous head was reinstated. I want to challenge him when I complete my own sword style," that was my one goal in life.

Kazama scoffed. "You could easily beat him with just your strength or speed, so what does it matter? It's not like they'd actually let a girl be their clan leader,"

"Women have been leaders in the Agano clan. I think there's two right now," I rebuked. "Besides, when I complete my sword style and challenge him we'll wear clawed necklaces that suppress higher influences,"

"Why?" he scrunched his nose up at the thought of such a device.

"In the beginning of the Agano's time the founder's brother supposedly tried to usurp power by drinking dragon blood. Since then the Agano have been cursed with weak and sickly offspring and each head pledges to use only the power humans are naturally gifted with during duels. Outside duels it isn't uncommon for Agano members to mingle with demons or use higher powers."

"Is that why your sister is so frail despite her Oni blood?" he inquired.

"That's probably the case," I agreed, "I was lucky,"

"You said your father was a sixth son?"

"Only two of his older brothers are alive, the other three he didn't even know,"

Kazama leaned against the railing, "That's a lot to remember. Was that something you learned as a child?"

I shook my head sadly. "My uncle visits us a few times a year."

"Your sister gave me the impression that she doesn't like the Agano,"

"She hates them." I corrected. "After my father died they didn't even look for us when they realized we were missing and not dead. Gorou-oji-san was the only one who searched for us."

"Her detest for them is reasonable," Kazama commented.

"She also thinks they're a bunch of hypocrites. When Gorou-oji-san told the others we were alive they immediately offered to take us in. In fact, they were trying to bribe us into their houses with sweet promises and expensive gifts. They didn't care that Gorou-oji-san wanted to raise us. They argued with him, saying we needed a family with at least one woman in it."

"The Agano don't have many women either?" Kazama pondered

aloud.

"Uh-m, the Agano family only has two surviving members right now: Ichirou-jiji and Gorou-oji-san. The other nine families have five to ten members each." I paused; he'd said 'either'. "Do the Kazama have few women too?"

"Oni in general are experiencing a lack of women. Few of us remain and daughters are rare,"

"Ho? I guess Hinata-onee-chan and I are lucky then, I'm sure there are Oni out there who wouldn't mind marrying half Oni."

Kazama chuckled, "Sure, if they were desperate enough. Most would rather wait for another female Oni to be born. Waiting a few years doesn't mean much to an Oni."

I glared at him, "We're too good for them anyways."

"You're too different for them,"

"Different is good," I retaliated.

"Good includes sleeping all hours of the day and living in a room that's more like a warzone?"

I scowled at him. I'd forgotten all about my sword practice. "I was talking about Nee-san,"

He sputtered, "That woman is not different in a good way,"

"Hah? Why not? She's a tochigami, a land god. That's pretty amazing," I turned away, swinging my sword in an arch. I took a step forward and slashed sideways.

"So, is that yours or your father's?"

"Chichiue's. Mine needs to be refined more, and named too. Maybe I'll have a sword forged specially for it, like the Imperial Chrysanthemum."

Kazama smiled wryly. "Would it be a demon blade?"

"Probably, I'd want it to be as sturdy as possible," I didn't get his sarcastic attitude.

"Nobody forges demon steel anymore," he snorted, "nobody forges good swords anymore,"

"The Agano's smithy still forges demon steel," I defended.

"Really?" Kazama deliberated for a second. "Could he repair the Douji-giri Yasutsuna?"

"The Douji-giri," I breathed, resting my hand on the sheath at my side. "Is it true Oni can't heal quickly from it?"

"It is. Did your sister tell you?"

"She did, but I guess it broke," I responded.

Kazama gaped at me, "What do you mean,"

I approached him, standing in the nighttime shade of the eaves. I wondered if we'd drink sake tomorrow, the moon would be full.

I drew the blade, showing off the chips, scratches, and cracks. He watched carefully as I drew my index finger across the sharp tip. A line of blood appeared, a drop growing in size. I placed my finger to my lips, tasting the metallic liquid. When I pulled my finger away it was as though it'd never happened, like most cuts I acquired.
"See?"

Kazama's ruby eyes had grown round, like a cat's. "Let me see the Douji-giri,"

I complied, zipping over to the stairs and out of my shoes before I skipped down the hall. I held the Douji-giri out to him, hilt first and he hesitantly took it. He looked at the blade for a long time before gingerly pressing his palm to the blade. A few beads of blood appeared from the thin scratch. The scratch didn't heal in seconds or even after a prolonged minute.

"Do you know what this mean?" Kazama quizzed.

"I'm actually from the moon like Kaguya-hime?" that'd be cool; though I hoped he didn't think I was being serious.

He sighed. "You're immune to silver,"

"Maybe it's a half Oni thing," I supplied.

"Half Oni aren't immune and neither are Rasetsu,"

"Hah?" I grinned, "That's pretty amazing of me, being the one Oni, half Oni, immune to our greatest weakness . . . silver? I didn't even know that,"

He ruffled my bangs with his uncut hand, surprising me with the attention. "Don't let it go to your head,"

The moment became awkward and I shook his hand off. I handed him the red sheath for the Douji-giri.

"Ho? Giving me my sword back? Aren't you afraid I'll run away or ambush you while you sleep?"

I laughed, "Why would you run away? We treated your wounds and fed you. Don't they say a dog never forgets the hand that fed him?"

"I'm not a dog," Kazama said, poking my forehead.

"Eh-to, you're more like a . . . cat?"

He gave me an incredulous look. "A cat?"

I snickered, "Uh-m, you're so finicky,"

He jabbed me with his boney finger this time and I balked, a miffed sound of exasperation slipping past my lips.

"You're more like an animal than me," Kazama retorted. He was wearing one of his creepy almost smiles. "A nocturnal one,"

I puffed, folding my arms across my chest, "So what?"

"Go to sleep already, I'm waking you up again tomorrow. You'll pass out if you drink sake while being so exhausted,"

"Hah? I'm not that tired, my body's tough!"

The smirk disappeared and he pushed me towards my room with his hand on my forehead. What was that, the third time? He was going for my forehead since it put me off balance, what a sneaky bastard! I felt dumb for not smacking his hand away but I enjoyed the game.

"Go to bed so I don't have to wonder where you are," he appealed, "I'll end up with panda eyes, like you,"

I twitched, teeth meshing together. "Panda eyes?" I repeated.

His lips turned up, amused by my reaction.

"I'll give you a 'panda eye'!"

He ducked out of the way, which was lucky. I'd been about to sock him as hard as I could, good thing I was tired and slower than usual. I heaved the door to my new room open, slamming it in his face. "Goodnight!" I shouted.

I heard him chuckling as he returned to his room.

I guess he'd accomplished what he wanted.

* * *

><p>I realized I had been tired, beyond tired even, when I woke up the next morning, scarcely able to remember crawling into bed.<p>

At first I thought I was up even before Kazama, and then I smelt breakfast. Grilled fish, rice, and vegetables boiled with herbs. My mouth watered and I rolled out of bed, fixing my new favorite yukata as I stood. It was red at the shoulders, fading to orange, then yellow and finally white around my ankles. It reminded me of a sunset, or sunrise.

I pushed the door open, peeking out at Kazama. He was eating on the deck. "Where's mine?"

"I ate it while you were sleeping," he informed me.

"What? You pig," I hoped he was joking.

"The fish and rice weren't covered so I left it in my room after Chizuru brought it." He explained. "For some reason she seemed reluctant to wake you,"

I giggled, feeling just a little guilty. That was my fault.

I stepped out, leaving my door open. There wasn't anything in there

that I didn't want anyone to see so it didn't really matter, though I left my other room door open most days too.

Kazama's room was still neater than mine. His futon was already folded up and Nee-san had moved a small desk into the corner where she stored all the medical supplies. The Douji-giri even had a stand now. Nee-san really liked to clean. Too bad I liked my room messy.

I spotted the tray of food, the bowl piled high with rice and a plate with a medium sized split fish. I brought it out and sat next to Kazama, who had half his fish gone and a dent in his rice. He'd only started eating a few moments before I woke up.

There were pickled vegetables and boiled vegetable with a small sake sized cup filled with soya sauce as well. Kazama already had his boiled vegetables eaten but his pickled vegetables weren't touched.

Curiously, I investigated, "Are you saving those for later?"

"I don't particularly like them," he clarified.

"Ho? I'll trade my boiled vegetables for them," I invited.

Without a word he switched the bowls. He seemed to like plainer foods.

We ate in silence after that, which was fine. If I said anything he'd just make a remark about my manners.

I finished and stretched. Kazama laid his tray on top of mine and stood up, pushing it back to his room with his foot. His manners were just as bad as mine when no one important was looking.

"Kouta!" I bellowed, startling Kazama. "Stop spying and get over here,"

Kouta nosed out from the bushes, still disguised as a brown fox. He morphed, elongating and rising to his hind legs. His fur turned into a robe and his ears and tail gradually shrank away. He yawned. "I wasn't spying; I was just waiting for my ten jugs of sake."

"Like hell you were," I stood up. "I'm drinking tonight, so I figured I'd get your sake the same time I get mine. Nee-san doesn't want me leaving the temple for a while so can you go pick it up?"

"I don't like associating with humans," Kouta whined.

I ducked back inside my room, picking up my purse. I took out a few gold coins and padded back into the hall. "Buy as much sake as you can carry and whatever we don't drink tonight you can keep,"

That perked him up, he held out his hands greedily for the money. "I'll go get it right now, Oni-sama!"

I threw it to him and leaned over the railing. "I'll cut your ears off if I find out you had a sip before me,"

"Yes, yes," and he disappeared in a puff of smoke, already a good distance away.

I turned to Kazama who had an entertained expression.

"How's your wound today?"

He shrugged, gently rubbing it. "It'll probably be healed in another few days, though I don't know how long it'll be giving me trouble for."

"Let's see if I can take any of the stitches out," I suggested.

I followed him back into his room and he fetched the zabuton cushions from under the desk, throwing one at me. Nee-san seemed to be trying to make his room more and more like a permanent residence. I thought she might have liked him.

I appraised the zabuton; it was plump and probably new. "Ho, I think Nee-san likes you more than she likes me,"

He leered at me, "Try not to sound jealous,"

I plopped down on the zabuton and gestured impatiently for him to sit as well. Nee-san might have liked him but he sure as hell didn't. I wondered what she did to him while I was sleeping or away.

Kazama sat in front of me, loosening his collar to slip his arms out. What would a normal girl's reaction would be like? Then again, it wasn't that uncommon to see a man's chest. Especially during the summer when immodest and overconfident men walked around with their haori wrapped around their waist.

It wasn't like I could compare Kazama's physique to the men from human settlements. His was smooth and flawless and toned. He even had muscles on top of his Oni strength.

"What's the sigh for? Don't tell me you're going to miss me when I'm gone," Kazama teased.

I tugged the end of a stitch. "It's grown over," what a convenient save. Would I miss him when he left? Things would go back to being boring. "I'm going to remove three stitches on your chest,"

I got up and threw my pillow behind him before finding the scissors on the desk. I sat down again and inspected his back.

The set back from the other day had closed up but it looked like it might need stitches for another day. The top most stitch could come out though. I snipped one side of the knot, gently pulling it out.

"Turn around,"

"You have the 'doctor voice' well practiced," Kazama observed.

He turned my way and I punched him in the gut, abs actually. His muscles were incredibly tough; I should have hit him harder.

"I may be injured but I'm still an Oni,"

"Tch," I seized the first stitch and removed it, then the second, and

stopped at the third. I hauled on it, checking if I could see the knot under the surface of the skin. I could just barely see the black beaded knot. "What to use, what to use." I muttered.

"Why not use the scissors?"

"Not sharp enough,"

"The needle?"

"It's curved, so no good," I pondered for a moment. "Be right back,"

I ran to my old room, slapping aside the bamboo blind. I had a similar desk in the back corner and rifled through the drawers until I found it. I hadn't touched the soft bamboo handle in a while. I grabbed my box of matches before jogging back, briefly wondering where my kiseru was.

I settled down again and lit a match, holding the needle over it for a moment.

Kazama's mouth dropped open. "That's not . . ."

I simpered, "Oh, it is," I laughed at his disbelieving scowl. "Want a tattoo after?"

"No."

"You're so uptight," I complained. I leaned forward to prod the skin over the stitch and he shrank back. I groaned. "There's no ink on the needle,"

He straightened, reluctantly allowing me to use the needle to uproot the stitch.

"Shakki," I murmured darkly and was delighted to see goose bumps appear across his chest in a wave of unease. "Done,"

Kazama checked his chest, as though to make sure a mysterious tattoo hadn't appeared and I cackled, holding my chest. He was too girly.

I struck another match, listening to the sizzle of the invisible amount of blood burn off the needle.

"So, you got a tattoo from a blind old pervert and then took lessons from him?" Kazama summarized. "I didn't hear that part of the story last time,"

I chuckled quietly. "That's because I didn't take lessons from him. I'm self taught,"

Kazama appeared quite alarmed. "Who do you practice on?"

"On myself, without ink of course. I'd be tattooed from head to toe if that was the case."

"That's disgusting."

"Ask Kouta to show you his tattoos tonight, they're pretty good," I

replied. "Maybe you'll want one,"

"No."

"Fine," I giggled.

* * *

><p>XD I wonder what Kazama's opinion of tattoos would have been in the anime or the game. He's old fashioned and always talks about 'the ay of the Oni' and stuff like that. Honor, pride, and other pretty words really suit him ;D

Review please :D

10. Sake, tattoos, and headaches

Review please :D

desirae668, you spoil me with your reviews T~T I love you so much! :D **Truthfully, Ayame is a character that reminds me of my aunt ^^; she's virtually shameless OwO it's sometimes a bit offputting XD**

One month and ten chapters :D I feel proud of myself. I'll admit the quality isn't where I want it to be D: but I'll eventually edit it . . . after I've finished it x.x

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 10: Sake, tattoos, and headaches.

There wasn't much for me to do since I was still injured. If I were better I would have probably joined Ayame in her training, maybe 'accidently' knocked her down once or twice.

She didn't practice during the day anyways, whether for my sake or because she herself could still barely stay awake.

We talked a lot, mostly about random stuff. Her favorite subject was about traveling and places I'd been to in Japan.

"What about your home, what's it like? I've never been on the Western Coast before. Takeshi-sama says it snows even more than it does on the mountains here. Are there many other demons?" she fired rapidly.

We were both sitting on the grass, close enough to the trees to be shaded. She tried to take a nap earlier and I had to bother her before she fell asleep and got cranky. She was still such a brat.

"No, there aren't many demons remaining in the West. If there are, they stay well hidden from humans and other demons." I'd seen more demons here than I had in a life time. Demon crows, foxes and raccoon dogs, spider women, white snakes, even a two-tailed monster cat. It seemed like almost every animal in the forest was actually a demon

disguised. "There's always lots of snow in the mountains during the winter, though less falls as you get closer to the ocean."

"Nee-san and I don't have to worry about snow since we're near a spring. The ground is too warm for snow to build up, though it does get muddy. If we do get snowed in Nee-san can always send her shiki disguised as humans to bring us back food,"

"It must be nice, having access to hot springs all year long," I mused.

"What? You don't have hot springs in the West?"

I chuckled, "You really don't get out much do you? Of course there's hot springs in the West, stupid." She huffed, crossing her arms as she did sometimes. I didn't think she realized she was pushing her bosom up. "My family's estate is surrounded by the woods, much like this one, though it's not in walking distance of a private spring. The nearest onsen is public and owned by humans."

She scrunched up her nose, "Uwah, does that mean you actually have to boil water to bathe? That sounds so time consuming,"

"Not everyone has such a convenient home," I chided.

Ayame was quiet for a second, formulating her next question. "What about siblings, do you have any?"

"I have two older brothers and a younger sister,"

"Eh?" she exclaimed, "I thought you were more like the only child type, or at least the youngest,"

I frowned, "Why?"

"Well," she blushed, "you seem kind of spoiled,"

"You should meet my sister then,"

"Ho? How old is she?" she looked genuinely interested. "What's your relationship like? Do you get along or do you argue?"

"She's eleven, no, twelve," I missed her birthday earlier this month when I went to find Hakuouki. Yet another reason to prolong my return, she'd have a tantrum over that. "She's spoiled and hyper. She's the youngest by a far cry and acts completely innocent in Oka-san's presence, though she likes to be rebellious. Rebellious might be too strong a word, especially when I'm sitting next to you,"

She laughed at that, "Give her another few years and she'll be as bad as me,"

"How so?" I asked, knitting my brows together. They were two completely different individuals, I doubted Ayame understood.

Her smile dimmed. "Some people really hate to be put in glass cases,"

I considered that. "That's the most normal sounding explanation I've

ever heard from you."

She elbowed me, hard. I stubbornly refused to rub the pain out of my shoulder. "So, what's her name?"

I scowled at her; she was hitting me a lot lately. "Emi,"

She pondered for a moment, "Kazama Emi . . . sounds burdensome,"

I snorted. "Is that a habit of yours? Reading too far into people's names?"

"Uh-m, I guess." She grinned sardonically. "Look at my name, names. Miyaki, Agano, and Kurosawa. Either way, I'm just a flower that doesn't belong. I'm just something to be looked at, something to be forcefully removed and then fed into an arrangement."

I hadn't realized she thought about herself like that. I scarcely understood her. If I saw it her way, I could say she had as many personalities as names. I didn't say that aloud, her self-esteem was deflated enough right now.

"Forget your last name, think about the name your parents gave you," she glared at me. I guess it didn't work unless it was both names. Always so picky, but I continued anyways. "Iris flowers are like weeds; they can grow practically anywhere and bloom longer than most flowers. They don't have the same delicate charm as others, but rather an unexpectedly rough beauty,"

She returned a blank stare. I'd forgotten she wasn't the brightest philosopher around. Any other woman would have taken that as a compliment. She wasn't too good with those.

"Are you saying I'm like a weed?"

I cradled my head, trembling with something like a combination of rage and amusement. I swear she was giving me a headache.

"No, Seaweed Head, I'm complimenting you,"

"Seaweed Head?" she growled, her face turning red, though I doubted it was from embarrassment. "You . . . you!" I didn't think she was smart enough to come up with an insult, "Acorn Head!"

"What?" seriously, that didn't even make sense.

She was blushing now. "Your hair kinda flips out," she gestured lamely.

Ah, I remembered why I found myself laughing more than I ever had before. I was laughing at her and her stupid jokes, crude manners, and pitiful comebacks.

"Stop laughing, you pig," she murmured, arms crossed again. Now really wasn't the time to make a comment about that.

I caught my breath. "You say stupid things,"

"You're stupid," she shot back moodily.

"Ano, Hinata-sama wants to know what you want to eat tonight . .
."

Both of us jumped. I was too relaxed; I hadn't even noticed her approaching.

"Beef cutlets!" Ayame exclaimed, "And, eh-to, more meat?"

Chizuru smiled placidly. I think Ayame's boyish attitude confused her. She probably wasn't sure how to deal with someone younger than her who acted like a boy _and_ had bigger breast than her.

"Why not sukiyaki? At least there's a guaranteed variety," I suggested.

Ayame agreed reluctantly. "And it's nice with rice and sake," she rhymed. "Thanks for cooking for us Chizuru-san; Nee-san's a horrid cook. Oh! Don't forget about Kouta's portion,"

Chizuru had been cooking this entire time? I felt cheated.

"It's my pleasure, I'm just happy to be of use after you and Hinata-sama found us," Chizuru replied conservatively.

"You should take a break and drink with us," Ayame offered. I hadn't thought she was the considerate type.

"Oh, no, I can't drink,"

"Ho? It's easy," Ayame reasoned. Of course it was easy; she just didn't understand.

I grunted. "Stupid, you're the only girl around here who drinks,"

She punched me in the side again and I sneered at her. Gradually, she was beginning to use more force, as though testing how far she could go before actually hurting me. "You could at least come and enjoy the food you cooked; it'd be funny being the only sober one there,"

Chizuru giggled a little, "I'll think about it," she threw over her shoulder as she treaded back to the temple.

"You're the only one going to be drunk," I jeered.

She smirked. "Kouta, is that all you could carry?"

Kouta appeared from an invisible path, disguised as a balding, black haired, middle aged human. He looked like a sake hermit! I couldn't count all the jugs of sake at first.

He shook the guise away like water and laid the cord of strung together clay jugs down. "Phew, that was heavy,"

"Sure it was. You won't even have ten with that amount," Ayame teased.

Kouta rolled his shoulders, sighing. "As long as you don't drink more than you usually do and the brute doesn't drink more than you then

I'll have twelve. Two of which I'll promptly drink tonight."

"Ho? I'll have to pace myself then, I can't let you have more than ten!"

"You're so greedy!" he bayed. "Carrying those jugs was hard work; I should get a bonus for that!"

"Maybe," Ayame conceded.

Just how much was she planning on drinking? I calculated the jugs, two and ten for the fox and another seven besides that. I shook my head, what a waste of sake. I could see tonight would be more like a drinking contest rather than drinking party.

* * *

><p>The sun had set and the night was bright with the light of a springtime moon. We'd cleared out Ayame's temporary room and set up pillows and armrests for the dinner. It was only set for three though there were a couple extra zabutons and armrests. The shoji doors were wide open, letting the night air in. It was pleasantly cool after the dry heat during the day. Summer had begun.<p>

"I told Aniki to come by if he thought about it," Kouta mentioned. "He probably won't come,"

Ayame had taken a bath earlier and her long hair was still wet and held in a high ponytail to keep off her green seashell printed haori. I had watched her pin it up for about fifteen minutes, carefully combing through each section of hair.

"He hasn't come around to drink since the New Year," Ayame commented.

Kouta sniffed, "For good reason . . ."

Ayame pretended not to hear that and leaned against her armrest. She was wearing grey hakama with the sea green haori. I noticed she had a third black collar under it and pondered if it was just decorative. She had more clothes than even my sister.

Chizuru tottered around the corner, trays stacked three high with plates laden with food. Hinata followed her with the sake. She didn't look impressed.

"Don't think you can get away with this every full moon," she scolded. "What's all the sake for? You couldn't finish all that with five people _and _Takeshi-sama,"

Ayame waved her off, "Don't worry, ten is for Kouta. We'll probably only drink eight or nine,"

Hinata sighed. "Ten is for Kouta? Were you two gambling again?"

Ayame snickered. "I owed him a favor,"

Hinata gave her a hard look and before shrugging, resigned. "Don't drink too much, you might actually get a hangover."

"We'll call when we want more," Ayame responded.

Hinata grumbled under her breath, leaving the sake between Kouta and Ayame.

Chizuru left after she positioned our dinner trays and I thought there might be an awkward silence. I wasn't used to this type of drinking atmosphere. Usually I drank alone or with Amagiri, and he wasn't much of a talker.

"I hear you've been hanging around a lady friend," Ayame baited, nudging Kouta as she reached for the sake.

"Hmph," Kouta rubbed his arm, eyes narrowed at Ayame. "You hear everything that goes on here, why should I be surprised?"

Ayame's expression became solemn as she poured herself a cup of crystal clear sake. "I don't hear everything. Do you know what I'm referring to?" she passed me the bottle, still satisfyingly hot to the touch. I caught a whiff. Undiluted, I guessed they were dedicated drinkers.

Kouta nodded earnestly. "The spider woman? I was wondering when you'd ask. I heard she came from the South,"

Her lips hovered over the rim of her saucer, she frowned deeply. She probably wondered if it had any relation to the Southern Oni, just as I did.

"Tobi was particularly nettled with you for knocking the snot out of him that last time. He was young and naïve and he hadn't been here for such a long time. He probably didn't realize you could only be pushed so far, and that you were quite capable of killing." Kouta noted the slow sip she took and the drawn line on her face. "Don't look so down, we're supposed to be partying. Hurry up and gulp that drink down and return to being a carefree simpleton,"

She tipped her head back obediently, emptying the cup. She held her cup in my direction and I raised one eyebrow.

"What?"

"Pour me another drink, idiot,"

Reluctantly, I complied. I never thought the day would come when I'd pour sake for a woman. How ridiculous.

"So, what about your lady friend?" Ayame repeated.

"It's none of your business," Kouta muttered over his cup of sake.

Ayame downed her sake again, exhaling patiently. "I hear she has big blue eyes,"

Kouta filled his sake cup again, "They're azure,"

"Same thing," Ayame had turned her attention on the food and was hovering her chopsticks over the meat. "She's a mountain dog, isn't

she?"

"So?"

Ayame swallowed a mouthful of meat and seasoned vegetables. "What does your brother think?"

Kouta grunted. "What do you think?" I thought Kouta might have been turning a little rosy from the sake, probably because he was trying to keep up with Ayame. I had already stopped counting how many times she refilled her cup.

She threw back another, hissing contentedly. "I'm pretty sure he's prejudice against crossing," she paused, "he's really pretty though. I guess that proves pretty people are shallow,"

Pretty? I stole a glance at her, looking for flushed cheeks. She didn't appear to be drunk.

"Pff, I'm not shallow," Kouta rebuked.

"Idiot, you're not pretty. You just like to stick your big nose where it doesn't belong,"

I almost choked on my dinner. She had to be close to drunk; otherwise she wouldn't be quite as loose with her words.

Kouta balked. "My nose isn't that big," he stroked it delicately, eyeing Ayame. "You're shallow,"

Ayame disagreed. "I'm not that pretty. He called me Seaweed Head,"

"I'm surprised no one else has called you that," I added.

Kouta giggled, "Seaweed Head, that's a good one. Yow!"

Ayame was pulling his hair, forcing his head to the floor. The neck of his yukata slipped over his shoulder, revealing the edge of a tattoo.

"Ah! I almost forgot. Kouta, show him your tattoo."

"Why should I? Show him yours," Kouta shot back as he fixed his collar.

"He's already seen them," she countered, "plus, I want to show him the ones I did."

He struggled against her futilely, her small fists balled in the material of his yukata. If he didn't let go soon she'd tear it.

"Stop it, you violent woman!" he cried pitifully. I couldn't understand why he didn't just transform or escape. He was drunk; maybe he hadn't realized he could.

I took another sip of sake, watching the entertainment. Ayame was clearly just bullying him halfheartedly.

He tired and let go and she hauled his arm out of sleeve, showing off the tattoo on his shoulder. "See? Isn't it pretty?"

The tattoo had a powdery blue sky with smoky grey clouds and a half cloaked sun. Sakura trees on either side of a frothy white stream interrupted the sky with their pink boughs.

"It'd look nice on a tapestry or a painting," her artistic skills weren't in question, just the medium she used.

"You approve? That's so nice of you," she clapped then cheerily drained another cup of sake. She was starting to look a little drunk, though she'd sounded drunken ages ago. Didn't she say she was going to pace herself?

I reached for the sake container but found it empty, I checked the next two and they were empty as well.

"We're out of sake," I complained. "You guys drink too fast,"

Ayame cackled. "You drink too slowly," she took a deep breath and bellowed, "NEE-SAN! More sake, please!"

Kouta held his ears that had suddenly transformed and simmered at Ayame.

"Yes, yes," Hinata yelled from her room, "I'll bring it in a minute,"

"Kazama, you should get a tattoo," Ayame recommended.

I decided to humor her. "Why should I get a tattoo?"

"Because, look at your skin: it's so smooth and flawless," she said, poking my neck. "Well, 'sides the hole in your chest," she slurred, patting my shoulder.

She rested her hand on my shoulder, squinting at me. I gazed back, wondering what she was looking at. Carefully, I peeled her hand off.

"Your cheeks are almost as red as yer eyes," she covered her mouth with the hand I returned to her. "You haven't even drank that much," she sniggered. "Don't tell me you can't handle yer alcohol,"

"You're drunk," I taunted, ruffling her bangs. _And seeing things, _I said to myself.

She didn't bother to fix them, even though they were sticking every which way and Kouta guffawed when she turned his way. I grinned; she was influenced by the sake.

"He's flushed, right, Kouta?" she shook him, though he was still cracking up.

"I think you're all a little drunk," Hinata answered, glowering from the doorway, with more sake.

Ayame seemed to have lost her fear of her sister for the moment. "Nee-san, have a drink with us, you're not smiling,"

Hinata laid the tray of sake down and left before her look of detest could turn into anything more. Ayame didn't notice and reached for the sake.

Kouta held his cup out to her and I joined him. She looked confused.

"Pour us some sake, o' violent one," Kouta fake pleaded.

"Un," I agreed.

She obeyed, brooding quietly.

A shadow fell over me as I raised the cup to lips.

"Hah? You've never poured sake for me before," I looked behind me, disgruntled by a tall and willowy man. I would have thought he was a woman if not for the fact that his yukata was open across his chest. His face was soft like a woman's. "What's changed since last I saw you? You've become so tame,"

"Aniki! You came?" Kouta shouted warmly, smiling dumbly. I could see the resemblance between the two of them, though Hayate seemed bolder and more confident than his little brother.

Ayame struggled to get her legs from under her, using my shoulder as a support. It twinged and I grabbed her forearm, forcing her to stay seated. "Hayate, you bastard, how dare you show yer face so late at night?"

He sat between us, graciously putting his arm around her shoulders. That wasn't the type of greeting I was expecting. He leaned down, as though to kiss her, and got a headbutt instead. I chuckled as he rubbed his jaw.

"You put me through the floorboards last time I tried that," he recalled.

"I don't remember," Ayame saucily replied.

Hayate leaned over her, stealing Kouta's sake. He poured himself some, ignoring his brother's embittered features.

"Ah, this is so boring. Sake parties are only fun when you're being rowdy, Ayame-sama. I miss the days when you rampaged," he reminisced.

"You're being awfully intimate with her considering I've heard you hate half breeds," I remarked.

"Heh? Ayame's strength has captured my heart and held it hostage these past years,"

Ayame drew her lips back from her teeth, grimacing at the disgusting form of praise. Her demeanor said she was annoyed and her curled fist told me she was about to punch him harder than he could take.

"Why haven't you been around since the last day of the year then?"

His narrowed eyes and upturned lips seemed to be paper thin.
"Well,"

She cut him off with an irritated grunt. "You just want to stay on my good side,"

His countenance changed, playful tone melting. "Am I forgiven?"

Kouta frowned at them, wondering what they were talking about, just as I was.

Ayame sobered for a second, peering down into her sake cup. "Yer forgiven, now get out of my sight,"

He adhered, vanishing in a flash. The atmosphere had suffered but returned to life as soon as Kouta and Ayame began to bicker again.

I hadn't realized I'd been trying to catch up with them and discovered the jugs empty again.

"Nee-san! More sake, please!"

I thought I might actually end up with a hangover.

* * *

><p>XD I don't think Oni can get hangovers :P you know, accelerated healing and all, probably a fast metabolism as well =w= makes me so jealous.

Review please :D

11. Gorou oji san

Please review :D

**Thanks again to desirae668 for reviewing :D I'm grateful for your reviews every week ^^^

Thanks to Swift the Illusionist for reviewing as well :D now desirae668 isn't alone XD

**Kazama strikes me as the possibly lecherous type, especially in Sekkaroku XD and he does things at his own pace :D **

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 11: Gorou-oji-san.

I jolted and immediately forgot all about the dream I'd been having. I wiped the corner of my mouth and crinkled my eyelids, squeezing them shut against the horrible sunlight.

There was a slight chill in the air and the unfiltered sound of the forest outside filled my head. A twinge of pain withered down my

spine and I curled into my pillow, stiff but warm.

"What are you doing, Seaweed Head?"

I jerked up, another ache shooting through my skull and down my entire body. I let a hiss escape and held my head.

"Hung over? I'm not surprised after all the sake you drank last night,"

I turned to him slowly, shading my eyes as I glared at him. Why the hell was he still in my room? He lid on his side, his flaxen hair half flattened.

Someone kicked me in the backside and I jumped despite my body's protest.

"Morning already?" Kouta groaned, holding a hand over his mouth. He was a bit on the pasty side.

"Your stomach is showing," Kazama commented.

I fixed my haori absently; glad I'd worn the black crisscrossed band of material over my chest. I hoped he was secretly disappointed. He was a pervert so he probably ogled anyways.

My forehead was throbbing painfully, like a pressure was building behind it. I massaged it gently, crumpling forwards; Kazama's legs were in the way. I lay down and rested my temple on his shin, which wasn't the best pillow.

"Oi, don't go back to sleep there,"

I growled at him, pinning his disobedient legs, which only made my migraine worse. My head felt hot.

"Are you okay?" he questioned. He stopped squirming for my sake.

"I don't get it," I moaned, "I've drank more than that before and got off with less,"

"Do you even remember how much you drank?"

That silenced me. "I remember Hayate coming by, but not much else," I'd even forgiven him for that. I felt like kicking myself.

Kazama scoffed, "That would explain waking up with you on my feet, just like a small child,"

I felt tempted to bite his ankle but stopped myself. I didn't want to accidentally hurt my already sore jaw.

Kouta stood up behind me but I didn't have the energy to sit up and actually look.

"Thanks for the sake, Oni-sama,"

"Are you going home?" I asked, "what about your sake?"

He burped in response. "You can keep it,"

I laughed, which turned into a slight cry of pain. "Come get it whenever you want,"

His presence suddenly disappeared and I concluded he was gone off to be sick somewhere less humiliating. It'd only take me a few seconds to fall asleep again.

Kazama's foot twitched and I peeled my eyes open reluctantly. I was facing his feet, which seemed huge up close. I pretended not to notice the twitch and feigned sleep. It was hard to imagine that his feet were dwarfed by Takeshi-sama's.

He cracked the joints in his toes and I huffed, irritated. I rolled off his legs and into a ball. Jeez, my head hurt.

"Are you going back to sleep? It's past breakfast already,"

"It wasn't served so I'm sleeping 'til dinner." A zabuton was just in my reach and I grabbed it, protecting myself from the merciless morning sun and the jabbering from Kazama and the forest. "How much did we drink last night?"

"Too much," he replied dryly. "There's only ten left,"

Nine, huh? "I wasn't lying when I said we'd drink eight or nine."

Kazama rumbled deeply in his chest, a sound that resonated in my head. "You insisted on challenging me to a drinking contest, that's what finished off the last two. The fox was the judge,"

I mashed my lips against the zabuton, "You won?"

Kazama was quiet.

"I won? Victory! Ita-ta-ta-ta!" my ears rang from my own voice.

"Strange, I've never seen an Oni with a hangover before," Kazama mused. "That proves women shouldn't drink sake,"

"I still won," I grumbled.

He snorted, jabbing his big toe into my spine. A shiver of pain ran through me and I furred into myself more.

"Are you okay?" he repeated, slightly more sympathetic.

"Uh-m, it'll go away in a bit," I hadn't ever felt this type of pain before and wondered if it really was a hangover.

"The sake cups and dinner trays have already been cleared away," he observed; his baritone voice softer. I didn't bother confirming with my own eyes.

"Nee-san's shikigami probably cleared it away. She might have done it herself but she's been taking it easy these past few days." I speculated it was the shikigami, since Nee-san would have had a fit after finding us sharing a common room. At least, she did when she

found me and Kouta passed out last time.

"What happened to her?"

"Hijikata's seal didn't come without a price," I retorted.

"Are you and Chizuru affected as well?"

He sure was in a curious mood. "No. The seal had to be written in ink that was saturated with blood. Nee-san used hers without telling me; otherwise I would have given mine."

He rested the flat of his foot between my shoulder blades, gently. "Disgusting," he supplied.

Abruptly, the torture from my head came to a halt. It was like the pain had never been there. I propped myself up, running my hand through my long ponytail as I contemplated.

Kazama sat up, awkwardly crossing his legs. He gave me a quizzical stare, which was extremely funny with his bed head hair. He looked more hung over than I had felt.

"No more headache," I announced cheerily, "I told you it wouldn't last too long." I stretched, taking a gulp of crisp mountain morning air.

Kazama regarded me with a quirked eyebrow. "You just wanted to sleep in," he accused.

I gave him a miffed expression. "My head really was hurting,"

His sanguine eyes became opaquely dark, like he was thinking deeply. He gestured for me to come closer and I did so with an annoyed pout. His moods changed so quickly sometimes.

He bewildered me by placing his palm against my forehead. His hand was cool in contrast and goosebumps rose on my arms.

A crease appeared between his eyebrows and I almost told him that he'd get wrinkles if he kept doing that. I'd be calling him an ossan by then.

"You have a fever," he diagnosed, as if he even knew about stuff like that.

"I've never, ever, had a human illness before," I sounded skeptical even to myself. Fevers were something I associated with human ailments. "You're just cold from sleeping with the door open,"

"Stupid, that applies to you too,"

"I was using your leg as a pillow," I defended.

Kazama rolled his eyes. He hovered over me, gripping the back of my neck to keep me from retreating. We bumped foreheads, touched noses. I closed my eyes, afraid to go cross eyes from staring back into the depths of his brilliant ruby eyes.

If I hadn't had a fever before I definitely had one now. My heart was pounding in my chest. I was overwhelmed by the proximity and the tickle from each exhaled breath.

He leaned back, his countenance serious. "There's no doubt that you have a fever," Kazama noticed my beguiled demeanor and smirked devilishly. "It must be quite the fever; even your face is flushed,"

I tried to come up with some witty remark, or even a dumb one, but not a sound would leave my gaping lips.

"Ayame-chan, Gorou-oji-san is coming to visit us!"

I sprang to my feet, broken from the stupor. "Really?" I exclaimed, stumbling to the door. "Today or tomorrow? When does Takeshi-sama come?"

Kazama's gaze was on my back but I ignored it for the most part.

Onee-san poked her head into the room, raising a delicate eyebrow when she spotted Kazama. The corner of her mouth turned up slyly.

"Gorou-oji-san is at the foot of the mountain right now. My familiar just saw him," Nee-san reported. "Takeshi-sama sent one of his shikigami earlier, though he won't be here until tomorrow."

"What's the occasion?" Kazama piped.

"Anniversary," I threw over my shoulder.

"You have tatami markings on your face," she informed Kazama.

I 'skipped' away, tramping through the forest in seconds, long ponytail catching in the branches of bristled trees. I even forgot my sandals in my haste. I hadn't noticed the tatami print on his face. Funny how distracting his eyes were.

* * *

><p>I was relieved by the change of scenery. In just a few minutes I broke through the thick foliage and onto the trail in front of Gorou-oji-san.<p>

"Oji-san!"

He wasn't surprised by my appearance, smiling jollily back at me, as though he had expected me ages ago.

"Ayame-chan, how are you?" he wore his dark hair long like I did, though slightly shorter than mine. His skin was beginning to weather, but his eyes were forever young.

"I'm great," I hugged him, voice muffled.

He rested his scruffy chin on the top of my head. "I think you've gotten taller," he teased. I hadn't. "Anything interesting happen since the winter?"

I bounced on my heels, dragging him up the trail. "We have three new boarders,"

"Oh, sounds fun. The temple must be an active place now. How long have they been here?"

"They arrived just this past week and a half," I wanted to explain it all at once but I was afraid of it coming out all in a jumble. "It's odd, but they were fighting to the death and now we're housing both of them, and a woman,"

Gorou-oji-san laughed good naturedly. "Were they fighting over said woman?"

I pinched my lips together. Had they been? "I don't know, but at least they're not still at each other's throats." I shrugged. "They couldn't even if they wanted to. The man who won, Hijikata, is still in bed from his wounds and the other one, Kazama, is recovering too,"

Oji-san contemplated that, "So your sister is running the lady around, like a servant?"

I giggled. He knew Hinata too well. "Uh-m. Chizuru seems happy to help though, and she's a really good cook,"

"So, who are you taking care of?" Oji-san inquired.

"Kazama. He's stubborn, proud, and a bit of a pervert,"

"A pervert?" he echoed incredulously. "He hasn't done anything to you?"

I snorted, "He's too weak to try anything, at the moment," I didn't know why I tacked that on. Not like he'd actually do anything, he just liked to say things he should keep to himself.

Oji-san clapped me on the back firmly. "You're a tough girl; you won't let any man take advantage of you."

"Of course!" I agreed enthusiastically, "I'm going to be the leader of the Agano someday,"

He chuckled, "You're going to have to strengthen your body first," he sobered, choosing to remind me of the condition. "Don't forget that you won't be able to access your Oni strength."

He always mentioned that. "I don't know how to strengthen my body!" I whined. We'd had the same conversation several times already. "Should I just go around knocking trees down until I gain some muscle?"

"You need to find someone as strong as you," he suggested, "another Oni, one that can be trusted."

I wondered if I should have told him that Kazama was an Oni. I'd let him know later, if he didn't already find out by the time he met him.

* * *

><p>The rising elevation and strong sunlight had a negative effect on Oji-san who wasn't used to mountain features. He was out of steam and sweating by the time we got to the temple. It couldn't be helped, he was getting old.<p>

Nee-san had dinner ready for us and we ate together in the front room, sharing stories back and forth.

"How is Hijikata?" I asked Chizuru when she came to take our empty trays. I was struck by just how beautiful she really was. She'd been haggard the first few days from the stress but she'd improved and recovered.

Chizuru smiled shyly. "He's much better. His wounds are still troubling him but he's able to sit up now,"

"That's great; I bet he'll be on his feet soon,"

Oji-san shook his head, "You're overestimating us humans again. He might be stuck in bed for another two weeks, even longer."

"Uh-m, it's easy for me to forget," especially when I spent all my time with Kazama.

Chizuru bowed to us before leaving, politely shutting the door quietly. I didn't really get Chizuru, she did such unnecessary things. She should have known it was okay to loosen up here when she was in familiar company. Oji-san wouldn't have cared.

"How about this 'Kazama' man?" he queried.

"Kazama's already up and about. I can probably take out most of his stitches today." I was still hesitating to outright say he was an Oni. Gorou-oji-san trusted Oni even less than my sister did. I'd only seen them from afar up until now and the danger they posed didn't feel real to me.

"His wounds must have been shallow despite being on the receiving end,"

Oji-san would be staying for a while so I couldn't hide it for long. "He was stabbed through the chest," I nonchalantly remarked. At least, that's how I tried to sound.

Gorou-oji choked on his tea. "And he's already moving about?"

"He's an Oni,"

There was a sizeable pause as Oji-san pondered how to proceed. He already understood that I had clearly neglected to tell him.

"Why didn't you mention this earlier? Are you sure it's safe to have him here? What if he gives away your location?"

Typical of Gorou-oji-san. He was always worrying that we'd be discovered and killed.

"He's an Oni of the West and he owes me his life," I reasoned.

"Even so," Uncle challenged, "you don't know his exact connections."

"I trust him,"

His saturninity enveloped me. It touched me that he felt compelled to worry for me but at the same time I thought his anxiety was exaggerated. The only time I'd really been in danger had been nine years ago. Even now, he tried to dissuade me from joining the Agano on the grounds that he didn't want me to be harmed.

I stood up, addressing him distantly. "I have to check Kazama's wound,"

He nodded slowly. "I haven't properly sat down and spoken with your sister yet," he conceded. He just wanted to ask her what she thought about Kazama and why she had allowed him to stay.

I let myself out before him, making my way out to the outer ring of rooms. I opened Kazama's door from the inside, startling him.

I smelt the lingering scent of fish and spotted the tray in the corner, waiting to be retrieved. "Good, you've already eaten,"

Kazama was sitting in the doorway, gazing over his shoulder at me. One leg was folded up to his chest, muscular calf showing. It wasn't too muscular, just enough to be noticed and gawked at.

He composed himself. "Wound care?" he guessed.

"Uh-m," I bent down to the desk, picking up the scissors. "Did you notice any of your stitches growing over?"

"No, you'll have to check for me," Kazama drawled, lazily freeing his arms from his yukata.

I felt myself blushing and mentally scolded myself. I hadn't been affected by his half nakedness the other day.

"Still have that fever?" Kazama taunted. "Maybe you should take it easy, I'm sure I could handle your sister for one day."

"No!" I felt like biting my tongue off. "I'm fine so shut up and sit still,"

I plopped down behind him, carefully examining the wound on his back.

The difference was astounding. I couldn't believe he'd healed so much over night. I assumed it was because the internal damage was repaired.

I snipped away the dozen or so stitches, pulling them ruthlessly. He flinched once or twice but refused to give in and complain to me.

Hesitantly, I crawled around to look at his chest. The blood was threatening to rise to my cheeks again and I bit the inside of my cheek to distract myself. If he noticed he didn't say anything.

The entry wound was much the same as the other. I emphasized a sigh of disappointment. "Looks like I won't need the tattoo needle today,"

"Tch,"

I felt my confidence returning. I hated when Kazama was in control of the situation and I enjoyed being able to make him feel uncomfortable like this. "Are you sure you don't want a tattoo?"

"I would never get something as dirty as a tattoo," he rebuked.

I cut and yanked the first stitch, causing Kazama to jerk and let a harsh breath past his drawn lips.

"Tattoos are not dirty," I schooled.

He turned his head away, ignoring me as I continued my torment. I suppose noble families, even those from the demon nobility, frowned upon things that invited bad reputations. I felt determined to change his opinion, though I couldn't think of a tattoo that would do his complexion justice.

"I'm amazed," I began, "your wound is completely closed up now. Must be nice, having such a body." He deserved some praise for enduring my onslaught of intentional harassment.

I held the scissors loosely in one hand and the clipped stitches in the other, appraising the white and pink scar with my doctor's eye. I was too busy staring to notice his sudden change in disposition.

He seized my wrist, knocking the scissors away and pressed my palm against the mark, preventing me from struggling. It was still an injury that could be aggravated and he had assessed that I didn't want to cause him any setbacks.

I still would have punched anyone else but my brain had melted in my head. I looked into his simmering irises once and forgot any cuss I could conjure.

"Payback,"

Kazama's strength overcame mine, if only by a little, and he pinned me to the floor.

I surveyed his crimson gaze, confusion dulling my indignant glower. His eyes weren't lit by his normal wayward light. Even his amused grin was gone. I raised my free hand to instinctually beat him away but he deftly captured it.

"You said you don't get sick yet you had a headache _and_ a fever this morning?" he summarized.

"Hah? So what?" I scowled at him. "I didn't have a fever, that was your imagination," I knew that was a lie though. There was a constant buzz in my head, like the hair rising moment before lightning strikes.

"Hn?" impatiently he bumped heads again. I was too irritated to

blush. I was annoyed with myself for letting him have his way. "You still have a fever,"

'I'm half, maybe I can catch human illnesses," I really didn't want to admit that. I preferred to ignore the boundary between human and demon. I was terrified of ending up like Nee-san someday, weak.

Kazama leaned back, allowing me some room. "Yet this is the first time you've been sick,"

"There's always a first time," I muttered.

He looked dissatisfied but released me after a moment. I scooted away, snatching the scissors as a means of self-defense. I almost chucked them at him when he smirked.

"So, your uncle is here?"

"Uh-m," I felt my rage boiling inside me. I wanted to scream and kick something. I hated capricious people, always changing the subject and pretending not to notice. "Why so interested in my health?" I was tired of following his whims.

He shrugged, still trying to weasel his way off the topic. His expression was subtly guarded. "No reason,"

He asked questions like it was his right then acted like he was above answering me. I let out a frustrated growl.

I returned the scissors to the desk, collecting the stitches and throwing them in the trash. Arguing with Kazama was pointless. I'd just end up throwing a tantrum and storming off into the woods for an hour.

Kazama readjusted his yukata and walked out onto the deck, leaning against the railing, observing a group of sparrows pecking at the base of a tree. I stalked off to my old room, slapping the bamboo blind away.

I missed my room. The clutter was oddly comforting, snug even. Expertly, I navigated my way around piles of knickknacks, searching for my kiseru. After a few minutes I gave up. If I couldn't find it, it wasn't there. I'd forgotten where I put my old kiseru.

I slipped out, dejectedly. "Hey," I started unwillingly. "Kazama, you wouldn't happen to have seen my kiseru?"

His lips turned up in a smile that was anything but innocent. "Not recently,"

I really, really, wanted my kiseru. "You're not lying?" I tried to drain the edge from my voice but I hardly succeeded. I was already convinced he stole it. I hung my head over the deck, long hair dancing across the ground as I checked for my ask pot. Thankfully, that was still in place.

Kazama approached and I straightened, half expecting him to boot me over the deck. I could see him doing something like that. I swept my ponytail over my shoulder. He definitely had something to do with my

missing kiseru.

He reached into his sleeve, a conveniently deep pocket, revealing my kiseru with a flourish of his hand.

I took a deep breath to keep a furious roar to myself. "Give it back," I ordered.

He lightly tapped the pipe against his hand. "You should be thanking me,"

"Why?" I sneered. He must have been really bored when he stole my kiseru.

He continued, "Chizuru was in your room after we cleaned up a few days ago. Your kiseru chased her on her way out,"

I paled. Nee-san had been there that day.

Kazama deduced what the sudden change was from. "Exactly," he pompously responded.

Begrudgingly, I thanked him, holding my hand out for it to be returned.

He shook his head, still tapping away. "Now would be a good time to quit,"

I ran my hands through my ponytail nervously. Sure, it was logical to quit after almost being discovered. I didn't have the willpower though.

"Please return that," I managed civilly.

He didn't budge.

I usually didn't lower myself to begging, though I was dangerously close. Either that or wrestling, I'd win too. My smoking pipe was on the line.

"Please? I haven't smoked in three or four days,"

Kazama chuckled imperviously. "I haven't smoked in months,"

I curled my hand into a tight fist, longing to pull back and sock him. He was just jealous.

"Ayame-chan?" Oji-san called.

I startled and Kazama stuffed my kiseru back into his sleeve, holding it hostage. He seemed to be holding my arm behind my back with it.

"Oji-san, over here," I hollered back.

Gorou-oji-san turned the corner, spotting the two of us against the rail, suspiciously natural. I felt guilty for wanting to smoke when Gorou-oji had just arrived.

"You must be Kazama, how do you do?" Gorou-oji-san greeted. His voice

was insignificantly strained. Nee-san had tried to convince him Kazama was harmless. He'd just have to test that now.

Kazama nodded, not quite friendly but minimally respectful all the same. "I've been better. I'm alive thanks to your nieces,"

I thought it was unlike Kazama to admit such a thing but figured even he liked to make good impressions. Most demons I knew hated interacting with humans. Oni must have been more tolerant, considering they appeared the same on the surface.

Gorou-oji-san looked distinctly conflicted to me.

"Forgive me, but you don't look like the Northern Oni from around here,"

He already knew he was a Western Oni. He was prudently questioning him, determining Kazama's trustworthiness by his own standards.

Indeed though, Kazama did not look like the Oni from around here. The Oni I was used to spying from afar were shorter and burlier with darker hair.

Kazama shrugged. "I'm not from around here," he glanced sidelong at me. "Neither is she?" he also already knew the answer to that. Both of them were being so wary.

I shifted uncomfortably on my feet. The stifling atmosphere gave me the feeling that they weren't getting along. They weren't.

Oji-san chose to ignore Kazama's retort and addressed me instead. "How's the Imperial Chrysanthemum? You haven't put any chips in it since then?"

"Nope," I rested my hand over the ghost of a hilt. "Where'd I put it?" I murmured to myself.

Kazama ran his hand through his hair. It was plain to me that he wanted to laugh. He held it in though, "In my room,"

"Oh?" I hadn't noticed. I wondered when I'd put it there.

I let a relieved sigh slip out and left them to their awkward staring.

The Imperial Chrysanthemum was in the corner, stood against the wall next to the Douji-giri's stand. I had an idea. If Kazama wanted to pull my arm, I'd pull right back.

"Oji-san, do you think the smithy could fix this sword?"

Kazama stiffened. Without looking he knew exactly what I had. I tossed it to Oji-san who caught it easily, curiously regarding it.

He unsheathed it, a look of pity in his eyes as he took in the chips and cracks. "The steel is still alive so repairing it should be possible. Kuri-chan will probably have to take it apart though,"

"Alive?"

I frowned at Kazama, "Uh-m. You were using a demon blade without realizing it?"

Oji-san returned the sword to its scabbard. He swept back his hair, gladly about to give Kazama a short lecture. "Demon steel is alive in the sense that the feelings and memories of the demons whose bodies became the steel remain. It's impossible for weak willed humans and demons alike to wield a blade of that caliber. Those who have tried and failed to control a sword with such origins lose their mind in the process,"

"That's the first time I've heard of it,"

Oji-san's pride inflated a little. "Agano village is the only place in Japan that currently has the ability to forge demon blades, thanks to the Yamaguchi smithies." He paused, "It's not surprising you didn't know. All the same, this is quite the blade,"

"It's the Douji-giri Yasutsuna," Kazama replied smugly.

Oji-san's eyes narrowed. No doubt he was suspecting Kazama of something devious.

"Who were you trying to slay with such a blade? The man you fought is just a human,"

Nee-san had explained all the details to him by now. I wondered what he thought of Chizuru.

"The man I fought against was an Oni for a short time," Kazama spat back.

He might have been offended by the mention of a mere human defeating him. I thought it sounded like he was defending Hijikata rather than himself.

Oji-san was famous for his short temper despite being extremely kind. I could tell that he was about to start an argument.

"Say, Gorou-oji-san, aren't you tired from hiking across the countryside?"

Oji-san inclined his chin in agreement, more for my benefit. He was irritating my patient, my guest, and he respected me enough to back off.

"I suppose I could borrow the bath for awhile?"

"Uh-m, go relax and take your time,"

Oji-san threw Kazama his sword before gliding off. He was graceful despite being one hundred percent human.

"He's confident for a man his age," Kazama remarked.

I sighed, "He'd be nice to anyone except a suspicious Oni with a thorny attitude,"

"Thorny attitude?"

* * *

><p>Review please :D

Thank you to everyone who reads each new chapter and those who have added my story to their favorites and alerts x3 I love you all~

Next chapter introduces Takeshi-sama :D sorry for all the original characters . it can't be helped D: practically everyone else died T~T

Historically speaking, Saito-san and Shinpachi-san are still alive but most everyone else major in Hakuouki dies Q.Q Kazama should be (is) dead but I love him too much for that xD that's my one Godly act. Actually, sealing Hijikata's Rasetsu thingy was pretty Godly too XD

12. Takeshi Tengu

**Review please! **

desirae668, thank you for diligently reading every week :D glad the last chapter made you laugh :D

I got so mad last Wednesday XD someone published a story after I updated and I lost my number one position T~T

**Thank you Arcee-chan for reviewing as well! I thought I'd lost you Q.Q **

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 12: Takeshi Tengu.

I ate alone again that evening and didn't see Ayame until night had fallen. From what I understood, her uncle didn't visit so often. She must have been with him during the afternoon.

She appeared suddenly, her yukata opened around her tattooed knees from the motion. "Bath's free," she announced, wet hair gathered in one arm, wooden comb held daintily by the other.

"I'm amazed you have the patience to take care of all that hair." I added, "It's a shame that's all you have the patience for," under my breath.

She shrugged, gently combing out a few tangles that slipped apart easily. Her hair was unexpectedly healthy. "This is nothing compared to the patience required for a single tattoo,"

She was deliberately annoying me with tattoos now. She didn't even care that I could see her legs bare to her knees, butterflies glimmering in the dim light, appearing almost alive. Maybe she was

flaunting them.

"I lied when I said I've never cut my hair before," she confessed. "I've trimmed it a few times and I even lost a bunch in a fight once," she picked through the train of hair, displaying a section of shorter hair. It was about a shaku less than the rest, hardly noticeable.

"Hn? I was beginning to think it was as perfect as doll hair. You must have been devastated when it was cut,"

She sniffed, stroking her hair lovingly. She really was affected by something so trivial. After a dozen more runs with the brush she folded her green hued hair up like origami and tied it with a plum colored ribbon. "Hayate cut it,"

I chuckled, "Is that what you forgave him for?"

She scowled to herself, "Uh-m, I can't believe I did that," Ayame suppressed a yawn. "Anyways, make sure you blow out the lamp before you leave the bath house,"

I nodded, picking up my bucket of toiletries.

Ayame stood, sliding her door open. It hitched halfway as usual and creaked as she forced it open. She was going to break it if she didn't fix it soon. "Goodnight,"

"Goodnight,"

* * *

><p>That morning I lay in bed for a while, wondering where I'd go now that my wound was healed.<p>

I could still feel that it wasn't completely resolved, but it didn't pose a problem in everyday life. It might have in a fight but there was no one to fight with me on equal grounds.

Where would I go?

I didn't have any money and neither could I call on favors, not when I'd turned my back on my family. I definitely wouldn't return to them now, not after abandoning their support and advice to chase after Hakuouki. They might have forgiven me, but I couldn't face them after losing.

Breakfast was cooking. Chizuru sure was taking her position as head cook seriously.

"Uh," I heard Ayame groan on the other side of the wall.

I sat up, raking my hand through my hair. She tossed and turned, complaining mutely. She whimpered and I perked up, staring a hole through the wall. She still had the fever? That was awfully suspicious.

There was only one thing I could think of that would cause both a fever and a crippling headache, but it simply wasn't possible.

It certainly wasn't a hangover, not after persisting for two days.

"Breakfast," Chizuru called. For once she started at Ayame's door.

"Wake up, Ayame-chan,"

I grumbled quietly. That man was infuriating.

"Not hungry," Ayame responded curtly.

He threw the door open, ignoring the hitch completely.

"Hora, get up or no breakfast for you,"

"I'm not hungry," she repeated.

I listened to the rustling of her futon. I could imagine her covering her head and hiding away.

"Oi, that's rude," he scolded, "Yukimura-kun went through the trouble of preparing your meal," Chizuru laughed nervously. She seemed to dislike being a part of a dispute.

She slipped away, delivering my food while he tried to persuade Ayame to get up. She was being particularly obstinate and he was having little luck. I was better at waking her up than he was.

"Good morning, Kazama-san,"

I nodded back, intently eavesdropping on his pestering. It was hardly eavesdropping, not when he was being so audible.

He paused, "What's wrong? Are you sick?"

"No," she lied.

Chizuru lingered in the doorway, concerned but not sure how to react.

"You have a fever," he discovered.

"Shh!"

He whispered, though he was still loud enough to be heard. "Should I get your sister?"

"No, definitely not. Nee-san fusses over me enough," she bit back a cry. "It'll pass in a few minutes."

"How long have you been like this?" he questioned. "Maybe you should ask Takeshi-dono when he arrives,"

"I'm fine," but she betrayed herself, voice quivering. "It started just yesterday; it's hardly worth thinking about,"

"You shouldn't be taking this lightly. You haven't been ill a day in your life,"

"Oji-san, please,"

He sighed, defeated. "If it persists I will tell you sister _and _Takeshi-dono,"

"Fine,"

He exited and disappeared down the hallway. Chizuru bowed and followed. Didn't she get bored of sitting at Hakuouki's side all day long?

* * *

><p>I couldn't blame Chizuru for wasting her day away with Hakuouki.<p>

I sat with Ayame later that morning, waiting for her to finish her cold breakfast. Not like there was anything else for me to do.

"How's your head?" I asked.

"I feel like someone's driving nails into my forehead," she murmured through a mouthful of rice. I didn't call her on it.

She finished and pushed the tray aside, chewing on her chopsticks for a moment before I cleared my throat.

"Your Tengu-sama arrives today?" I confirmed.

"Uh-m, I can't wait," she babbled excitedly. "My birthday is during August but he can never make it since the shrine is really busy at that time. He brings me my birthday present now instead,"

I snorted, "Aren't you a little too old for that?"

She scowled at me. "You're never too old for a birthday present. When's your birthday?"

"May," I felt the corner of lip twitch.

"Oh?" she seemed disappointed. "I'll get you a birthday present if I remember,"

It wasn't a matter of remembering. "I'll probably be gone by then," I reminded her. I still didn't know where, but I couldn't stay here for another year.

"That's true, though Nee-san might decide to keep you," Ayame teased.

"I'm sure your sister wouldn't put up with me for that long," I returned. I wouldn't put up with _her_ for that long.

Ayame giggled, "Nee-san is as much a pervert as you are. She's a sucker for a man with a pretty face. You'd have to do something pretty horrible to get kicked out,"

I guffawed, holding my sides. "Is that so?" I managed. I didn't make any insinuating remarks about the pretty face part. She already

realized that had been more her opinion than her sister's.

It seemed like her headache had faded away, though her cheeks were still red, partly from embarrassment and partly from the fever.

"So, what are you expecting from the Tengu?"

She answered without missing a beat. "Inking paper and maybe a new brush. Condensed ink tablets too,"

"You paint? I thought a rebel like you preferred to prick holes in peoples' skin," the mere thought disgusted me but it put her in a good mood, usually.

She huffed, "Of course I paint. How else would I have the confidence to permanently paint someone's skin?"

I rolled my eyes, reversing the conversation. "What's the exact date of your birth?"

"August seventeenth,"

It was sometime in early July right now. I wondered if I'd be loitering here for another month. "If I'm around I'll make sure to be especially nice to you,"

"Idiot, you better get me a present," she retorted.

"Alright,"

We were quiet for a moment, though I didn't miss the glare she was directing at me from time to time. She was looking back and forth from one sleeve to the next.

"Wondering which sleeve has your kiseru?"

She startled, "Uh-m,"

I shrugged. "If you can guess I'll give it back to you," I folded my arms, daring her to begin.

Without thinking she chorused, "Right!"

I grinned, "Too bad,"

She lurched, catching my left arm and patting it down. What a violation of my personal space and the rules. She glowered at me, reaching for my right.

"Where's it to?" she hissed.

"I must have left it in my room,"

She crawled over my lap, stumbling to her feet. She actually intended to search my room for the damned kiseru. I flung myself up, darting in front of her.

I felt lightheaded after just a moment of exertion. I anchored myself in the doorway, blocking her.

She ducked under my arms, "Too slow!"

I grunted. The wound had certainly taken its toll. I was out of shape.

She swiveled, about to intrude into my room and I captured one arm, attempting to pull her back. My strength wasn't enough to completely overpower her but she was halted

I reeled her in, smirking as she cursed. She strained, hauling me a few inches. She'd win if it was just a battle of endurance.

I wrapped one arm around her ribs, lifting her off her feet. She flailed, heel connecting with my shin.

"Kazama, youâ€!" she cussed and I rolled my eyes. "Put me down, you brute!"

Ayame was ridiculously light; I hadn't realized just how scrawny she really was. She was strong because of her Oni blood but had a tiny waist and a soft stomach.

"Anno, Hinata-sama asked me to tell you that Takeshi-sama has arrived,"

I dropped Ayame and she intentionally landed on my foot. I didn't have to worry unless she hauled back to stomp on it.

Chizuru was rosy cheeked, like she felt guilty for walking in on something. It'd just been a little joke. It spread to Ayame who gazed back sheepishly.

Ayame slapped her hands on the railing, literally trying to drive the awkwardness away. "He's in the main room? Let's go!"

She grabbed my collar, yanking me after her. She was probably hoping that her Tengu-sama would put me in my place. Not a chance.

A short minute later we were in the main room. It felt more like a dojo with wooden swords and staffs on racks. Hinata was seated next to her uncle and across from the man who could only be the Tengu.

He was obviously tall, even sitting didn't hide that fact. He wore an elegant gray kimono with two cranes posing on his back. His black hair had a healthy volume to it. I thought the Tengu was the splitting image of demon nobility.

Ayame bounded towards him and I almost grabbed her by the scruff of the neck. Her childish energy seeped out in her gait, adding an exaggerated bounce to her step and chest. That was honestly the only mature part of her.

I raised an eyebrow, claiming an unoccupied zabuton. She was hugging his back, stooping just a little to balance her chin on his head. His coal black hair had feathers mysteriously woven through, adding to the body of his bobbed cut.

He patted her hand that rested over his shoulder. If he stood up he'd be almost twice her height. He made Amagiri look average.

When he spoke, his voice was unexpectedly light. "How are you, Kazama-san?"

I was taken aback, he was addressing me first? I figured he would have dealt with the monkey clinging to him instead.

"I'm good,"

"Ayame-chan hasn't been tormenting you with questions?"

I hadn't expected a land god to be so normal and that made him seem even loftier. I shook my head. What questions would she have been asking?

She had the same idea. "What would I be asking him?" she scoffed. "Takeshi-sama, how is the main temple?"

"Lively as usual," he reached into his kimono. "I have your present,"

She let go of him and sat obediently next to him, not even bothering to get a zabuton.

"Your sister told me you had more than enough art supplies and seeing as you'll be sixteen next month I decided to get you something different." He handed her a narrow box. "Go on, open it,"

She complied, dull golden eyes widening. She carefully held out a hair ornament, a simple black lacquered rod with elegant, dangling, jade stones. She picked out four more with amber and translucent blue polished gems. I thought it was ironically similar to the butterflies on her legs.

She laid the hair pieces on her lap, mouth hanging agape as she took out the final, ornate, kushi comb. The comb was set with the same colors, plus an opal at the center.

"Takeshi-sama . . . something so fine is wasted on me,"

He gestured for her to sit in front of him and held his hand out for the pins and comb. "Hinata-chan hates jewelry but don't think I haven't seen you ogling at Tomoe,"

She stared down at her hands, letting him comb through her hair with his huge hands. "How is Tomoe-sama?"

"She's a bit frustrated, having to stay at the temple while I visit you girls. She misses your visits." He twisted her hair into a thick winding bun, carefully positioning the five wooden rods. Two green at the top, two orange at the sides and the single blue at the bottom. I was amazed that a man could perform such a task. "She helped pick out your present, so did most everyone else." He fit the kushi in, pulling back part of bangs. It brightened her face and made her eyes look less wild.

Ayame felt her hair, a giddy smile on her face. For a moment her boyish appearance was tamed and she looked like a real girl. "Thank you!" she exclaimed.

"You look beautiful," her uncle praised.

Hinata crossed her arms sternly. "Don't you dare break it and definitely don't go running through the woods with them in."

They shared a laugh at Ayame's expense. She sat stiffly, uncomfortably. No doubt she was panicking about forgetting them somewhere already.

"Takeshi-sama, you do realize she'll have very few occasions to actually wear them?" Hinata advised.

"I'm sure she'll find places to wear them in the future." He said that with the utmost confidence and I too wondered when and where she'd display such finery.

* * *

><p>Everyone ate supper in the front room that night, including Hakuouki, who was also borrowing an oversized yukata. His had a sparrow theme.<p>

The seating was questionable. Hakuouki sat directly across from me and glared unhappily. Ayame's uncle Gorou sat on my left and Hinata sat on my right. Ayame was between her uncle and the Tengu, hairpins still in perfect order.

I pondered how Hakuouki might have felt as I ate. He'd been in the middle of a fierce battle and now that some time had passed, they probably thought he was dead. Would he go back once he was recuperated? He shouldn't, he should be staying with the woman at his side.

With the meal finished Chizuru and Hinata stood up, collecting dishes. Ayame reluctantly assisted, carrying the brunt of the trays and plates.

"How are your injuries, Hijikata-san?" Gorou inquired.

"They're not too deep," he replied. "They could have been worse,"

"That's a relief," the Tengu commented. "And yours, Kazama-san?"

"Nearly healed, thanks to the quick aid of those sisters," I didn't have any doubt that I was alive only because of Ayame who discovered me at the foot of the mountain.

Hijikata folded his arms, looking straight at me with one of his stern frowns. He was probably trying to decide if I was a threat.

I cleared my throat, "You clearly won so stop worrying,"

He narrowed his eyes at me and it seemed like neither one of us cared that we had an audience. "I'm weakened right now. You could easily take Chizuru and run,"

"Ho? So you do love Chizuru," I sarcastically remarked. It was painfully obvious how much he cared for her. "Chizuru is your woman and I respect that,"

"So you were fighting over the woman," Gorou interrupted.

"I decided to fight Hijikata Tousei even after my family disapproved. At that point it didn't matter if Chizuru was or wasn't there, just that I'd be able to fight him one last time."

"It was a matter of pride," the Tengu remarked.

Hakuouki's harsh look faded. "You've given up on Chizuru then?"

"I gave up a while ago," I admitted. It was true. I had known almost immediately that she would never love me, no matter what. She was too attached to the Shinsengumi and its demon vice captain.

Hakuouki snorted, still unsure.

The women returned and our conversation broke off.

"Kazama, want to spar with me?" Ayame offered. It was clearly a challenge. "Unless you're afraid your wound will slow you down,"

"Now, now, Ayame-chan," Gorou intervened. "He's still healing, you don't want to send him straight back to the sickbed,"

I stood up, assessing my condition. I was weakened from the magnitude of damage and recovery but I could still spar. I wasn't about to let that man underestimate me.

"Sure," I was certain she just wanted to show off to her Tengu-sama. I was the same way when I was a child.

She picked up a bokuto, a wooden practice sword, the kind that was solidly firm and could break bones. She'd chosen one that was slightly shorter than the Imperial Chrysanthemum and I assumed it was a more preferred size.

I scoped the wooden swords out, comparing them for a moment. There were quite a few.

We faced off in the center of the room, five sets of curious eyes on us. The Tengu and Hinata looked only slightly interested while Gorou was leaning in. He was grinning and betting on Ayame.

"The goal is to either disarm your opponent or force them into submission," Ayame explained concisely. Hakuouki tightened his folded arms and Chizuru sat up straighter.

"Alright,"

She charged forwards without bowing or waiting for a count and raised her sword for a clear chest shot. I held my ground, the vibration from the wood sending a painful shiver through my arms.

Ayame gauged my strength for a short second before surrendering a step, unable to force me back. She was a completely different person when she held a sword. In a barehanded fight she would struggle and waste her energy. She slashed diagonally, blades grinding.

She jumped back, abruptly changing styles. I thought it might have been from her father's original Imperial Chrysanthemum to her own nameless style.

I guarded against a swift stroke but she danced back, twisting and nicking the blade. She was completely open and I stepped in, aiming a one handed swing on her unprotected back.

I didn't hesitate to strike her, there was no strength behind it anyways, just a tap.

She spontaneously changed the grip on her handle, maneuvering the blade behind her back. Our blades connected and she spun, face to face with me, swords locked.

We both took a step back, unable to force the other away. What kind of style was that? It seemed horribly unreliable.

Her stance was really strange, always openly inviting me to take a stab at her. Each time she broke into my defense by compromising her own. She left her guard down, then twirled away. She showed me her back, then defended impossibly. Yet, when she made an attack of her own it was precise and difficult to escape.

It struck me as strange that she was using neither her speed nor her strength. I halted, seeing if she'd change anything.

"Out of breath, Kazama?" Gorou called. I felt like chucking my bokuto at him. I was breathing deeper but only slightly.

As I suspected, the moment I stopped attacking she moved into a newer, indelicate stance. However, it still wasn't the Imperial Chrysanthemum.

There was weight behind her first cut. The wound in my chest twanged and I gave her way.

She swung her blade in such a way that I was forced to angle my body or drop my sword. I played dirty, kicking her away before she could either disarm me or take my neck. That was something I learned from Amagiri years ago.

Gorou sounded more upset over it than Ayame did.

"Uh-m, I still need to work on the offensive." She straightened, pretending to have hardly felt it. I'd done it instinctually and hadn't really held back.

I felt a twinge of regret. I reasoned that she deserved it after punching me so many times in the past few days. She was still a girl though, made even more apparent from the pins loosening in her hair.

In a moment's hesitation on my part she surged forwards, two hands on her hilt. Our swords connected and she hauled back, bearing down viciously again. On the third time my wooden blade snapped and the edge of hers splintered.

She pulled back for a chest shot and I caught the blade with one hand. I dragged her towards me, putting what was left of my bokuto

under her chin.

Gorou's disappointed grunt was followed by clapping from the Tengu and Hinata.

Ayame sighed and stepped back, as though she had expected this outcome.

"I thought I could have out endured you but your experience clearly compensated for that," she bowed deeply and I smirked, returning the gesture.

She was good but I couldn't help remembering when she had cut down the spider monster and fox. If I had been up against that I surely wouldn't have won. Not in my current condition.

* * *

><p>Please review! :D

I'm amazed right now XD I combined all my documents into one to save space and turns out it's eighty-seven pages long e.e

13. Premonition

Geez, Kazama must have been really bored at the beginning of this chapter XD

Thanks to Arcee-chan for reviewing XD she even admits that she's a bad reviewer XP

Thanks to my loyal reviewer desirae668 :D sorry to hear about your ankle, so here's a Friday update just for you :D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 13: Premonition.

I woke up with a crippling headache again. I rolled over and moaned into my pillow. My hair was down, sprawled across the floor and futon; I must have tossed and turned quite a bit in my sleep.

It was still early; breakfast hadn't even begun to cook. Why was I awake?

I heard rustling through the thin wall and froze. Was Kazama awake? I didn't want him to hear me. Fat tears budded in my eyes.

The door to Kazama's room opened and I hid my face under the blanket, hurriedly wiping tears away. I prayed that he was going to the bathroom.

Kazama stopped and I knew he was in front of my door, debating whether or not to announce himself or just walk in. The door slid open, catching, and I furred my toes. Why did he have to come in? The pain threatened to bring a cry to my lips.

"Oi, Seaweed Head, I know you're awake." Kazama's rich alto voice interrupted, cutting through the morning stillness.

I shrank into a ball, defensively pulling my hair under the covers with me. I didn't think he was above hair pulling.

He chuckled, "You look like a snail,"

Intense shivers scurried under my skin and I thought I might gag. Kazama approached and sat next to me. After a moment of silence he laid his hand gently on my side.

"How bold of you," I whispered, voice quaking, "to touch a lady there," I joked.

Unfazed, he prodded my side and I wriggled. I was ticklish even though I was in pain. "I can feel your ribs, idiot,"

He dragged his hand down to my hip and back again and I giggled, twisting away while remaining wrapped up. "You pervert,"

He crawled after me and fenced me in with his arms. "How's your head?"

"_It is fine_," I lied. It still hurt. It was more bearable when the sun was blocked out and I was too busy to really think about it.

Kazama pulled the comforter away and I flinched, covering my eyes from the assaulting light. His cool hand cupped my forehead and I whimpered, fighting my way out of his grip.

He held me down, his huge hand blindfolding me. I tried to relax but my whole body trembled. He could probably feel the moisture from my eyes against his hand.

"It's getting worse," he commented. "You should tell your sister."

I shook my head, tears filling my eyes and spilling down my face through the minute gaps between his fingers.

"I will tell her if you don't," he promised.

A sob escaped and I wanted to somehow run away. I grabbed his wrist, my tiny hand unable to even wrap around it completely. I couldn't hope to budge him.

"What are you so afraid of?"

I froze. I wasn't afraid, but I couldn't say I wasn't. I couldn't lie, not out loud.

"What are you afraid of?" he repeated and loosened his grip. I held his hand in place, not wanting him to look at me.

I bit my lip, physical pain forgotten. I was dealing with a more ferocious fear, one that was like a gigantic hole in the back of my mind.

"I'm afraid." So afraid. Terrified.

Kazama gingerly pulled me up and rested my forehead against his chest. I let go of his arm and he moved it to my back, softly stroking my hair.

"It's strange," I began. "That I'm more afraid of myself than I am of you. You're an Oni through and through, and I'm just a wannabe,"

His chest rattled from a repressed chortle and I sighed. It was hard to be serious when I had a horrible way with words.

"You want to be a true Oni?" he asked. "It would hardly help you,"

"I'm afraid of being one or the other," I confided. "I'm afraid of being both and afraid of being neither. Yet, more than anything, I'm afraid of being like my sister; weak and unable to fight."

"You're being irrational,"

I butted my head against his chest, ignoring the sensation of needles scrapping my skull.

"I'm jealous. You've lived long enough that nagging uncertainties don't bother you anymore."

Kazama scoffed, pushing me out to an arm's length to ruffle my bangs. I hoped my eyes weren't too puffy. "You, just how old do you think I am?"

I grinned. I had a decent guess. "Oji-san is fifty-seven and you begrudgingly reply to him with strained politeness. That means you're definitely less than fifty.

He nodded, "You can't discern more than that?" he challenged. He thought I was making obvious deductions.

"Older than thirty, less than fifty. You respect Hakuouki but I think he's your junior. If I knew his age I'd make a guess within three years of your actual age," I tucked a curtain of hair behind my ear. "It's hard to tell when you look like you're twenty,"

His eyebrows shot up, "Thank you for the praise, but how do you know I'm not twenty?"

I snorted and responded before thinking. "You smell older,"

He twitched his lip, not sure if he should be frowning or grinning or laughing. He subtly sniffed; wondering if it was something easily perceived that he'd failed to notice. "I swear, you must be part animal as well. Enlighten me, how do I smell 'older'?"

I wormed my way under the cover again, "I can't explain it," I replied, voice muffled.

Kazama had already discovered I was extremely ticklish and grabbed my sides, raking his fingers across them.

"Stop it!" I exclaimed, cackling as I tried to retreat.

"Explain how I smell to you," he demanded, faking utmost seriousness. He was just teasing me now.

"That's too broad," I panted. It was hard to breathe when I couldn't stop laughing.

Nee-san's room door opened quietly down the hall and we both stiffened. I hope she hadn't misunderstood somehow. It should have been clear that he was harassing me.

She didn't walk our way, going to the east wing the long way. I peeked out from under the blanket in time to see Kazama shrug and attack my ribs again.

I took advantage of my renewed strength and tried to scurry away but he caught me easily, like a cat playing with a mouse. Where did he get his energy from so early in the morning?

He pinned me to the floor on my stomach, one handedly.

"Stop, stop! I give, you're squishing them!" I wheezed. He was squishing more than just my lungs.

He let go, "Them?" he inquired.

A deep blush rose to my face, I was having a really bad day for letting things slip past. I could smell breakfast cooking and thought it couldn't arrive soon enough. I sat up, pulling my collar tight. I wasn't wearing a crisscrossed halter over my chest today.

"I'll go help Chizuru with breakfast, it must be hard cooking for seven people all by herself," I invented quickly. The amused look on Kazama's face probably meant he'd figured out on his own what I had been referring to.

"Oi! "!

I pseudo teleported as quickly as I could, claiming sanctuary in the kitchen. Chizuru jumped, dropping a half peeled carrot on the floor. I quickly tied up my tangled hair, not caring about it for a moment.

"Good morning, Miyaki-san," Chizuru greeted timidly.

"Don't be so uptight," I scolded. "Call me Ayame-chan,"

"Eh?"

I slapped my cheeks. "Yosh! At your service, what should I do? Miso? Pickled vegetables? I can make rice balls,"

Chizuru gaped at me for a moment before she sorted through her muddled thoughts. "Eh-to, the rice is finished so you can make rice balls with it,"

I rifled through the cupboards, picking out spices and toppings. "Be back after I wash my hands,"

I skipped away before she could reply, drawing water from the well to scrub my hands in. Kazama was on the deck, conversing with

Takeshi-sama. I wanted to go over and talk to them but couldn't abandon Chizuru after promising to help. I tossed the water away from the well and zipped back.

Chizuru startled again and I rolled my eyes. I wondered if all female Oni were so petite and fragile looking. I suspected she was capable of more than she let on, the same way I looked less threatening than I really was.

I scooped out a heaping of rice, flattening it in my hand before adding a pickled radish slice. Skillfully, I molded it into a soft triangle and attached dried tea leaf ears. I used fermented soybeans as the eyes.

I went on making onigiri, using dried seaweed, dried fish, various spices, and sesame seeds.

Behind me, Chizuru was filling the trays with soft boiled vegetables and pickled side dishes. The miso soup was boiling slightly and the fish was almost done grilling.

"Kazama dislikes pickled vegetables so you can switch his with my boiled veggies,"

"Eh? Is that so?" she glanced back at me, appraising my work. "How wonderful!" Chizuru shuffled over, admiring the multitude of rice ball bunnies and bears.

"Four for every person," I counted off, "and these ones are for Kazama since they're more or less plain."

"So, Kazama likes plain foods?" Chizuru absently mused. She was an easy speaker once she got used to people, it seemed. "I thought he would have liked more . . . fancy foods,"

"No, no, no," I interjected. "People like Kazama who act self important are usually the type that enjoys simpler things. It's the contemplative type that enjoys more extravagancies,"

"Eh? Really?"

"Uh-m," at least, that's what I had gathered thus far.

Chizuru went back to the miso, stirring it before dishing it out. "Hinata-sama said we won't be serving breakfast in the main room this morning,"

"Kay," I sorted through the onigiri, placing them on rice paper in the trays. I made sure Kazama got his three plain ones and slipped in one with the sourest pickled topping I could find. I giggled uncontrollably for a few seconds, stopping before Chizuru appeared truly disturbed.

I couldn't wait to see his reaction.

* * *

><p>"So, what were you and Takeshi-sama speaking about?"<p>

Kazama sipped his tea, half way through the rice balls. The one with

the sour pickle was on the far right and the last one he'd eat by the looks of it. "There was a tall Oni looking for my body,"

I frowned. "You're body? Do you mean he wants you dead?"

Kazama shook his head, a light smile on his face. "I suspect it was Amagiri come to take my presumed dead body home to my mother,"

I munched on a pickled radish. "So you were going to your death when you came here? Should I have left you to die peacefully underneath the sakura tree?"

Kazama harrumphed. "I came without caring whether I won or loss. It was just bad luck that someone like you found me,"

I bit into a particularly crunchy carrot and earned a well deserved scowl from Kazama. "So, Amagiri is a family member?"

"He's a family friend," he corrected.

"Cool," I took a bite out of a rice ball bunny and chased it down with a gulp of tea. "Do you know if he's still in the area?"

"Knowing him, he probably is."

"Should you go find him and tell him you're not dead?" I ventured. I didn't particularly want Kazama to leave. He was annoying and perverted but he was also the first friend I'd made in a long time.

Kazama picked up the third onigiri, thoughtfully nibbling. "He's probably realized by now that I'm not dead. Amagiri is pretty intuitive; I wouldn't be surprised if he found a way here,"

I huffed, "You belittle my sister's abilities as a tochigami,"

"She's not perfect," he reminded.

"She's since recovered," I defended.

Kazama finished the rice ball and tackled the fish. "How exactly is the shrine protected?"

"It's not just the shrine," I rectified. "The whole mountain is under Nee-san's protection. It's just the area around our home that is shielded,"

He pondered that for a moment. "If it's shielded, why can the fox siblings enter?"

"Kouta and Hayate know about the barrier so it's easy for them to pass through it." I swallowed a mouthful of miso soup and continued. "Physical barriers consume too much energy and Nee-san hates to waste hers on it when nothing ever happens here. The barrier she uses instead is more like a mental block. When you don't know about it and look at it you see just another part of the woods, if you wander in you feel 'unwelcome' and turn around."

He reached for the fourth onigiri and I slurped my tea by accident. He raised an eyebrow. "So what happens if you need to defend from someone who knows you're there?"

"Nee-san can maintain a physical barrier for a while, long enough for help from the main shrine to arrive. If help can't come soon enough she'd hand it off to me and fight with her shiki,"

He took a bite and chewed slowly. He hadn't reached the pickle yet. "What types of spells can you use?"

"Only a few compared to Nee-san." I paused, three types. "I'm really good at barrier type spells and I can assist in any sealing jutsu. Other than that I know two or three reliable combat spells,"

Crunch

Kazama turned to glare at me slowly, his nose scrunched up. He had a disgusted look on his face like he'd just bitten into a sac of spider eggs. "Very funny," he snarled.

I mustered up all the elegance I could and sampled my lukewarm tea. He plucked out the pickle like the picky eater he was and flicked it onto my tray. I giggled and choked on my tea.

"I should have known you were up to something, this onigiri even had a grouchy face."

"What do you think of the onigiri? I made them myself," I dared him to say they tasted horrible.

"They were fine until just now,"

"That's no good, Oni-san. You're supposed to tell a woman her cooking taste good no matter what."

Kouta jumped onto the deck railing, disguised as a normal fox. He scared the daylights out of me.

"Kouta, what brings you here?" I asked. Something about the dry humor and nervous swish of his plush tail rubbed me wrong. "Is there something wrong?"

"Not particularly. Is Takeshi-dono still in residence?"

The formality startled me. "What's wrong?"

He ignored me, "Is Takeshi-dono still in residence?"

Kazama replied for me, "He is."

As if on cue, Takeshi-sama descended. His huge black wings cut the air once before landing, sending a whirlwind of billowing wind our way. The sunlight revealed shimmering, purple, geometric shapes across the span of his wings.

Kazama's eyes widened marginally.

"Little fox, do you bring news?"

Kouta jumped off the rail and morphed midair, jogging to Takeshi-sama. He glanced back at me and murmured something to Takeshi-sama that was lost over the short distance.

Takeshi-sama's black eyes sharpened and he nodded mutely. Kouta dashed back into the forest, once again a brown fox.

Takeshi-sama gazed over his shoulder at us, catching my eyes. "I'm sorry, Ayame-chan, it appears I have to leave early,"

"Eh?" I complained. "What's wrong? Why was Kouta being so secretive?"

He blinked, addressing Kazama. There was a faint glow in his black eyes, "You'll stay for a while longer, Kazama-san?"

Kazama clenched his fist, "Yes,"

Without another word he pumped his powerful wings, shooting into the air, gone in an instance.

I stood up, stomping and sending my chopsticks clattering to the ground. "Hah? What is up with those two?"

Kazama chugged the last of his tea, rolling his shoulders. "Looks like I'm staying for a while. Your Tengu-sama went and ordered me," he sounded irritated.

"Ordered you?" I thought he had just queried in passing.

Kazama leaned back, a resigned look on his face. "He's old and powerful. It doesn't surprise me that he can compel me to do his bidding."

I'd heard of things like that before, though I was under the impression it was purely telepathic. Why would Takeshi-sama even need to influence Kazama to stay?

I had a bad feeling about the whole incident.

* * *

><p>Please review :D

14. Night terror

**Please review :D **

Kanashibari is the term Japanese people use for old hag. It literally means to be bound by steel. Kinky XD just thought I'd share that ;D

Also, sorry for the rough quality x.x I couldn't write from Kazama's POV very well this time around T~T

A special thanks to my new reviewer, Mochi! Have you ever tried mochi with sweet red bean paste? Peanut butter and sesame seed is good too :D They're all delicious!

Thanks again to Arcee-chan, who has become a more loyal reviewer~

**Thanks to silentxangel for the super long review! It made me so happy hearing your opinion on my story! "Uh-m" is sort of Ayame's version of yes and also an agreement. I'm glad you like the way I portray Chikage ^^ I molded him a bit differently but I think it's okay, seeing as how he acts around an enemy is definitely not the same way he'd act around someone who isn't an enemy :D I think. I'm overjoyed that my OC's haven't ruined it for you either :D I put a fair bit of work into them before I started writing ^^ beware of the next few chapters! ;) **

The update was just for you and you missed it XD that's alright :D desirae668 is my dear reviewer =w=

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 14: Night terror.

I was, unarguably, a light sleeper. It wasn't uncommon for me to wake up just from a gust of wind, and a certain girl crying out in her sleep definitely warranted my attention.

I sat up, rubbing sleep from the corners of my eyes. I waited for her to make a sound but it was quiet again and I lay down. She was always waking me up with her tossing and turning.

She rolled over before I could be lulled back to sleep by the tranquil night and I opened my eyes again. A sob caught in her throat, "Nhhâ€"!"

I got up reluctantly. A nightmare, seriously? What a baby. My door wasn't a problem to open but hers would make a racket if I wasn't careful. I hoped her sister wasn't a light sleeper.

I silently glided to her room. Even if I had walked normally I doubted I would have woken anyone up. It was just a precaution. I carefully jiggled the door over the hitch. I left it open and stood in the doorway for a moment.

She lay on her back with half the covers thrown off. The cotton was coming out of her futon around her tightly gripped fist. I shook my head and sat next to her. Her face was damp with sweat and in the gray light from the moon outside I noticed the white material clenched in her hand was stained dark with blood.

I unfurled her hand, which was sticky from the fever. The scratches had already healed.

"No . . . !" she whimpered, flailing her arm. Her eyes were still pinched shut.

"Oi," I said as loudly as I dared. "Calm down," I patted her hand but she struggled harder. She kicked her legs and swung her arms, fighting an unseen enemy. I bent over her, tapping her cheek lightly.

Her eyes flew open, glowing yellow like white hot steel. Her irises were a dull golden yellow normally, like her Oni nature was always near the surface. I'd thought maybe that was why she was so strong for a half Oni. If that was the case, she was more like a Rasetsu right now, her eyes kindled with topaz instead of ruby. The wild fear hit me like a brick, literally.

I reeled back from her backhanded fist, nursing a busted lip. The animalistic glint in her eyes died and she blinked sleepily. "Kazama? What are you doing here?"

What was I doing there? I regretted it now, having been caught off guard and punched in the mouth. "You were crying in your sleep,"

She suddenly convulsed, hands flying to her forehead, a pitched moan escaping her clenched teeth.

I knelt next to her again, resting my hand over hers, pulling them away. She let me replace hers with mine, icy compared to her scorching skin. She gasped, shallowly wriggling. Her body trembled as though she were cold.

"Should I get your sister?" I offered. I debated getting her even if she refused.

"No! She'll wake everyone up if she has to go scurrying around for medicine,"

My hand already felt warmer and I moved to switch it with my other hand. She caught my wrist to keep it there.

"Relax; I'm just switching hands,"

She hesitantly let go and I pressed my free hand to her head again. A fever like this would have destroyed a human. If it kept getting worse she wouldn't survive. Even a full Oni couldn't take much more.

"Kazama, I'm afraid . . . !"

It wasn't like her to openly admit that. It proved just how much stress it was putting on her. "Do you want me to get your sister?"

She shook her head, lower lip quivering. Tears were flowing freely from her half lidded eyes.

I removed my hand and stood up. Ayame wrapped her hand around my ankle weakly. "I'm going to get a damp cloth, I'll be right back," I tried to reassure.

"Don't go!" her voice was hoarse, barely more than a whisper.

"I'll be right back," I repeated. She of all people should have understood just how fast an Oni in a hurry could move. Still, she refused to let go of me. She wasn't thinking straight. When did she ever?

I should have just gone anyways but I found myself sighing. I sat

down and placed my palm over her forehead. It was hard to believe that she'd been suffering through this the last few days without giving in.

"Stay with me until I fall back asleep," she begged.

"Alright,"

A couple minutes later she was asleep again and I spent the rest of the night tending to her.

I fetched the bucket from my room and a rectangular cloth I could dampen. I periodically cooled it down in the water and wrung it out, laying it on her forehead.

I'd doze off for a while then wake up again, checking on her. She was a troublesome kid, letting it get this bad without telling anyone. The moment her sister got up I'd tell her.

I told myself I was only catering to her because of the tengu's order. _"Take care of her," _it had resounded so clearly in my mind, _"she needs you."_

Honestly, I probably would have stayed even if he hadn't made me. I would have taken care of her even if he didn't say so.

* * *

><p>The sun had risen and I sat up, stiff from spending the night on the floor. My arm was still asleep, tingling from being used as a pillow.<p>

I peered at Ayame, her black hair in a tousled mess. I'd already removed her blanket and yukata, leaving her in just a white hiyoku. I tried not to feel like I was violating her privacy.

Not like it actually mattered, I'd already seen her scrawny legs up to her thighs.

I got up, padding down the hall to Hinata's room. "Your sister has a fever," I called, hoping she was awake. The door flew open and I unconsciously took a step back.

"What?"

I didn't have time to explain, she was already charging down the hall like a mad woman. I followed after her, shaking my head. Ayame was right, her sister was fussy.

"Nee-san?"

I stood next to the door, looking in quietly. I waited for Hinata's opinion on her mysterious fever.

Ayame tried to sit up, unsuccessfully. Hinata kept her down and pressed the wet towel to her forehead. "How long?" she asked.

I answered for her, seeing that the terse question was beyond Ayame's understanding. "Since the sake party,"

"It's not something catching then. I would have caught it by now if that was the case," she checked Ayame's pulse and peered into her eyes, even checked her mouth for a rotten tooth. Oni could be affected by a bad infection. "Ayame-chan, you haven't eaten anything strange since the party? Before?"

Ayame shook her head. Not like she'd remember.

"She cut her hand on the Douji-giri," I supplied. Maybe she'd just reacted differently.

Ayame waved me off. "Wouldn't matter,"

"Why?" I demanded. She knew her sister was immune to silver?

"It just wouldn't,"

I scowled at her. That was a poor explanation.

Hinata held her shoulder in one hand, a gesture I hadn't noticed before. She squeezed, tendons flexing. "Kazama, is there anything you know of that would affect Oni?"

"No." At least nothing that would affect a half Oni, no matter how closely they resembled a true Oni.

"Are you in pain, Ayame-chan?" her voice broke but I doubted Ayame noticed in her feverish state.

"Just a little,"

She probably didn't even know what pain was and what reality was now. Hinata dampened the cloth again and sloppily wrung it out, letting cool droplets of water run down her face and through her scalp.

"Nee-san, Oka-san had red eyes, right?"

"Yes,"

"That's strange, I remember someone with yellow eyes . . . I wonder who they were," she trailed off again. "He's dead . . ."

Hinata swept her bangs out of her eyes. "Who's dead?"

"Otou-sama,"

Hinata choked back a sob, "Yes, our father died,"

"Isn't he sad?"

I furrowed my eyebrows. She was talking like a little girl, that and her sentences were looping back on each other.

"Who's sad? Otou-sama isn't sad," Hinata was coming apart at the seams, her usual confidence dissolving. Each word Ayame spoke threw her into confusion. I sat down next to her, trying to be a comforting presence.

"Onii-chan,"

At first I thought she was talking about another Oni, as Kouta often referred to her as 'Oni-sama'.

Ayame curled into herself, clawing at her neck. Her eyes fluttered open, darting about blindly. I grabbed her fingers, holding them in check before she could claw herself.

Hinata shuddered, not sure what to do.

"It burns!" she wailed, futilely resisting my grip.

"Hinata," I started but Ayame writhed and I had to hold her still again, lest she do herself harm. I was forced to hover over her, pinning her legs with my knees and restraining her arms with one hand and her head with the other. "Is there any way you can calm her?"

She had lost her color and it seemed as though she might throw up any minute. She pulled herself together for a moment and made a strange hand movement. A red band appeared around Ayame's neck and her erratic movements ceased. I placed the damp cloth onto her forehead again and stood, smoothing out my clothes.

A strangled sob sounded from Hinata's throat.

"What do I do?" she held her tears back with the heels of her hands. "I don't know what to do against a fever like this,"

"It's always worse when she first wakes up, maybe it'll taper off later today," I provided. Ayame's condition was bad but I didn't think she'd let it take her completely. She was too strong-willed for that.

"You've known about it these past few days?" she spat.

"Yes,"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

I wish I had, though it wouldn't have made a difference. "She didn't want me to,"

Soft footfalls sounded and I leaned out, looking down the hall. Gorou was approaching. He saw me and his face fell, reading my expression. He hurried and I gave him room.

"Did you know too?" Hinata furiously questioned.

Gorou dipped his head, "I'm sorry, I should have told you right away."

She rose to her feet and did something unexpected. She swung at him and he let her beat her fist on his chest. "Why? What did I obtain power for if I still can't protect her?"

He hugged her, "It'll be okay. Ayame's strong, there's still hope. Just focus on the barrier before they notice,"

"They might know how to help her,"

"Hinata!" Gorou scolded.

I wanted to ask who 'they' were but knew I wouldn't get the answer. Gorou and Hinata were purposely avoiding saying 'their' true name.

"Arguing isn't going to help Ayame," I interrupted. I plopped down next to her and wiped the sweat from her face before swishing the cloth around in the bucket again, squeezing the excess water out and placing it on her brow again.

"Hinata-chan, he's right. Go see if you can find anything in the library, I'll go check the perimeter,"

Gorou left without another word, bounding out of sight. Hinata turned to me slowly, her brown eyes watery and pink. "You'll stay with her?"

"Un."

* * *

><p>The day progressed without much improvement. Chizuru brought breakfast as usual and asked if there was anything she could do. There wasn't and, hesitantly, she left.<p>

She came again during the mid afternoon with a snack of plain onigiri.

"She's still unconscious?"

"As you can see," I retorted. Her fever hadn't gotten any better either, despite the day having worn on.

Chizuru sat down and placed the tray of rice balls between us. "Do you want to take a break? I'll watch over her for you,"

I snorted. "What would I do if I took a break? Visit Hakuouki instead? Maybe play a friendly game of temari?"

Chizuru smiled a little at my acidic words, as though she could see through them to the anxiety I was hiding. It wouldn't have been that hard at this point.

"Why do you sit next to me as though you've forgotten all the things I've said and done to you?" I inquired, feigning disinterest. "Shouldn't you hate me?"

"No, I don't hate you," she replied.

"I called you a pathetic woman," I reminded her.

"You did, and thanks to that I had the resolve to go after Hijikata-san even after he told me not to,"

"Because he was protecting you?" I scoffed.

"Because he was afraid he couldn't protect me," she corrected. At

least she knew.

Ayame rolled her head to the side, the first movement from her in a while and I absently fixed the cloth on her head, pushing her bangs back.

"Kazama-san, you have a gentler side to you than you let on," Chizuru observed, a light smile on her small lips.

"You're blind," I rebuked.

"No. Even that first day we met you went easy on Okita-san,"

"There was no pleasure in kicking someone who was half dead on their feet,"

"You sympathized with the Choshu,"

I barked a harsh laugh. "You're imagining things,"

Chizuru sighed, resigned, and stood up. "Then, you at least care what happens to Ayame-chan,"

She walked off before I had the chance to answer and I figured she was tired of trying to convince me of my inner nature. It wasn't her business.

Ayame's eyes opened, subtly lost. "Kazama?" she murmured, stretching her hand out painfully slowly. She rested it on my knee and I lightly laid mine on top of hers.

"How's your head?"

"Thirsty,"

I felt my lips turn up in a guilty grin. I shouldn't have found that funny but at the same time I was relieved that she was somewhat conscious again and not thrashing. I took up the cup of tea I had saved and let cool for her and carefully held her head up.

She gulped, swallowing more air than tea and coughed. I pulled her up into a sitting position, steadying her against my shoulder. She drank deeply and finished the cold tea quickly. When I tried to pull the cup back she clasped onto the rim with her teeth.

"Still thirsty?" I mused. The fever had dehydrated her quite a bit. I held her chin, easing the cup from her teeth. She was biting with some strength, enough that I thought she might break the cup.

Her nose twitched as my arm passed her gaping mouth and her eyes began to flicker to life, incandescent light reflecting off the opaque gold. Ayame latched onto my arm before I discerned her intention, drawing blood almost instantly.

"Oi!" I yelped. It stung, a lot.

I hooked my finger under her lip, trying to encourage her to let go. A trickle of blood ran down her chin and she hooded her glowing eyes. She unburied her teeth from my arm and swallowed the blood.

A shiver ran down my spine. How very beast like. She revealed her blazing gaze again, dimming slightly, and wiped her chin with the back of her hand, blinking slowly. "Blood?"

I appraised my forearm, the deep gouges from her canines already fading away. The hazy look cleared and she sat upright, holding a hand to her red lips.

"Don't you dare throw up," I commanded. "You drank it so don't waste it."

Why hadn't I thought of that sooner? Oni blood was powerful and had great restorative abilities, though it was taboo to drink another Oni's blood. Admittedly, I hadn't assumed it was quite so effective.

She looked even paler than normal. "I'm sorry,"

I checked her temperature, satisfied. I offered her my bloodied arm again.

"I'm sorry; I didn't realize what I was doing,"

I scowled at her, a relieved smile in disguise. "You made it dirty, you lick it clean,"

Her eyebrows shot up and she gave me a disgusted glower before crawling away towards her discarded futon. "I'm going to throw up, I feel so icky," I glimpsed her discretely flicking her tongue over her lips.

"So, how do I taste?" I teased. I was just slightly nauseated by the whole blood drinking incident.

"Ugh, you don't want to know," she had noticed that she was striped to her under clothes and hastily dressed in her yukata. "You pervert."

I chuckled, "Do you realize what kind of state you were in?"

She froze. "I had a really strange dream,"

I picked up the neglected damp towel and wiped my arm off before tossing it in the wooden bucket again. "What was it about?"

"It wasn't really about anything. I just dreamed I was looking over someone's shoulder. Everything was pitch black yet she moved with certainty, after that I woke up because I smelt and tasted your blood. Very disturbing,"

"I suspect everything since last night has been one long nightmare for you,"

"Uh-m,"

* * *

><p>A while later her sister came by and discovered her awake and doing much better. Hinata even overpowered her with a hug, which proved Ayame still wasn't functioning at a hundred percent.<p>

She had already deteriorated since drinking my blood. Though she insisted to her sister that she was over whatever had affected her. She especially wouldn't say why she had suddenly gotten better. I had promised not to say either.

After a while Hinata left, saying she was sending a shiki to look for their uncle since he hadn't reported back in a while.

"You should have drunk more," I commented, lying on my side, watching the sun draw closer to the horizon. In another hour it would be setting.

"I need to figure out what's causing it first," she shot back.

"I'm sure if you just drank enough of my blood it wouldn't matter. I'm as pure an Oni as they come,"

"Get over yourself," she snapped. She'd been irritable since she'd gotten over her initial shock.

"I saw you smacking your lips," I tormented. "I must have tasted delicious,"

"Pervert,"

I shrugged and sat up. I could already tell the sunset was going to be a red one.

She suddenly sprang to her feet, grabbing the Imperial Chrysanthemum as she did. She drew and narrowed her eyes towards the tree line. "Kazama, you can fight barehanded right?"

I nodded; we'd been surrounded by a dozen or so Oni. A moment of admiring the sky and I'd lost the advantage. "Any idea who they are?" the first appeared, a spray of blood across his tan skin and steel grey kimono. He hoisted a body over his shoulder, familiar long hair swinging.

"Kurosawa Oni," she growled, eyes lit with angry flames. "What have you done to him?"

Oni melted from the forest, an assortment of clans that I could recognize by appearance but not by name. I caught sight of a Shiranui clansman, wavy purple hair cut short and loose.

A disembodied voice rang through the yard, "We caught him just outside and figured we must have been close, Oni of the Tengu's Mountain, Kurosawa Ayame,"

He materialized in front of us, pitch black hair framing his flavescent eyes, a crazy grin splitting his face. He stuck a short sword into the decking before flipping back, standing next to the Oni with Gorou's body.

I heard movement from inside the house. "Run, Ayame!" Hinata whispered fiercely.

Ayame was rooted to the spot, staring at the kodaichi. It had the same coloring as her father's sword, even the same demon steel.

"Do you remember it? The day we came for you?"

Ayame's hand shook from gripping her sword so tightly. She was lost, unsure what to do against so many men.

"Where were you watching from? Did you see your parents slaughtered? Did you even know what was happening?"

Two sets of eerily alike eyes stared back across the yard. Ayame's Kurosawa blood had never appeared so pure. I thought she might have looked more Oni than the one who prodded her with questions.

"What's with that look on your face? You don't remember? Or are you just mad?" he laughed, "Don't worry, little sister, there's plenty of time for us to talk,"

Ayame flinched. "Little sister?"

"Of course, we're related by blood. No one told you?"

The door behind us opened, revealing Hinata. "Don't listen to him!"

"Oh, it's your other half sibling,"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Ayame seethed and resorted to logic. Not her strong suit. "In order for you to be my brother you'd have to be my mother's child with another Oni,"

He chortled, "I'd be as cursed as you if I shared that woman's blood," he abruptly snarled. "No, we share the same father,"

Her eyebrows knit together, "My father was a human,"

"Eh? Who fed you that lie? Look at that pathetic half Oni standing behind you; do you really believe that you're the same as her?"

"Don't listen to him!" Hinata pleaded. Wasn't she a tochigami? Why wasn't she doing anything? I really wished I had the Douji-giri and my full strength.

Ayame half spun to stare at her sister. She heard the same honesty in his arrogant voice as I did. Hinata refused to answer her, gripping her arm instead.

"Nine years ago, our father was slain by that demon blade and the man you thought was your father was consumed for using a power that he couldn't control. Your wretched mother died trying to protect him from it and we were left with too many casualties to even follow after a single Oni girl.

"I wonder what today holds in store, either way; blood will stain this pathetic mountain red."

* * *

><p>Please review! :D love you guys.

****Sorry x.x I just made Ayame's past even more messed up x.x but there were clues in the past chapters D: ****

****Also, expect a couple faster updates in the weeks to come, I have three more chapters ready to go right now xD but I hate to post them all at once. Rather, it's fun to save them for posting on a rainy day or when Hanashobu gets pushed down the line. I really wanted to do that on Monday but I'd just done a Friday update and I didn't want to spoil my loyal readers too much XD plus, I was waiting for desirae668 to review ;D****

15. The Oni of the South

****Please review :D I put a lot of work into this chapter, though admittedly the ending is boring x.x sorry.****

****It happened again D: someone updated right after me T~T****

****Thanks to desirae668 for reviewing speedily and pointing out a mistake XD I fixed it :D****

****Thanks to silentxangel for reviewing as well :D Twilight ruined vampires D: every single one of them was a Marry Sue :(in my opinion): also, I'm glad the chapter provoked your interest :D her brother is a bit nutty :I can't wait to eventually get more into the Kurosawa issue ^^ mochi is amazing :D though I still like the regular red bean paste ones~ green tea mochi isn't bad, but green tea pocky is the best!****

****Arcee-chan! I'm so glad that you're regularly reviewing~ every review I get is like a tasty snack! Thank you! Also, Nee-chan isn't sophisticated enough to say things like 'contagious' xD I like Hinata because she tries to act all high and mighty in her own way but is really even less secure than Ayame. I love imperfect characters~****

****Also, I decided to cap the 'o' in Oni since it looks nicer and even the wiki does xD****

*** * ***

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 15: The Oni of the South.

The fever was building in my head again, leaving everything around me blurred into the fading black. I stared straight ahead at the Oni who was my half brother. I felt my gut drop, a sickening feeling overcoming me. His yellow eyes, the same as mine, were poisoned with an abysmal hatred that consumed him.

I felt pity for him, but not as strongly as I felt for myself. My whole world had been flipped upside down. A nagging voice in the back of my head told me to let go, let go of everything.

The dam I'd built myself was overflowing, memories leaking in. The smell of blood wafted; a red streak across my vision, a visual cue as well as a scent. My hand locked around the hilt of my father's Imperial Chrysanthemum, no, Agano Rokurou's Imperial

Chrysanthemum.

The blade burned blood red, a mist floating off it, youki swirling restlessly. I remembered cutting down twelve men, twelve Oni, in a mountain pass. Three bandits with broken bones, their necks twisted worst of all, eyes white and rolled.

Ha-ha! What's wrong, little Oni?

I turned around, staring at my sister's frightened face. Her lips moved, "Watch out!"

_Whoa-to! Guard! _My arm moved by itself, disconnected and alien from the rest of me. I didn't even feel the impact of a stronger Oni's blade against the Imperial Chrysanthemum.

Unwillingly, I faced him, foreign strength filling my body. Kazama was locked against another Oni, holding a blade inches from his face with his bare hands. A trail of blood ran from his palms down his arms.

I caught his eyes and he roared at me. "Focus, Seaweed Head!"

I couldn't. I was only half in my body, holding on with an invisible hand. The red aura around the sword I held spread across to the other Oni's weapon, melting it. Before he could jump back it sank into his flesh, corroding it off his bones. I lurched forwards, slashing through his chest. I had expected a torrent of blood but it boiled away.

The youki curled around me and I thought it would kill me but I didn't physically tense. It twisted around me like a snake, lovingly draping on my shoulders.

_Ho? This child loves you quite a lot. _The spirits of the sword loved me? That couldn't be. Rokurou killed them brutally for his livelihood. I was his student. _Don't you understand? They sympathize with you because you're the same. Hunted. Ha-hah-hah! _

I moved again, taking both the arms off Kazama's opponent. I saw his face for a split second, red eyes widened, amazed but not frightened. The burning miasma swept around him. 'Kazama!' I tried to scream, 'Don't let it touch you!' but the words wouldn't form.

The gas receded from him, listening to my feelings. _Hah? How interesting. _I darted, cutting through swords and Oni with the hungry blade.

It was starving and wanted to devour everything in its path. The whines of a thousand demons filled my head, every one of them struggling for a taste. One stood above the rest, a dragon with no eyes.

"Retreat! She'll kill us all!"

My gaze flickered to the yellow eyed one. "You cowards, she hasn't even transformed yet!"

_Oho? Is he tempting me? Stop holding back and let me show him power that rivals the gods. Let us show him a natural disaster!

—

Something around my neck snapped like a taut wire and I went under, sucked from my body. Instinctively I caught onto my shoulder. My long trail of hair lightened until it was leafy green, red suddenly coloring it in brilliant waves. She stood perfectly still, hair burning crimson and jade like a red maple.

"Kurosawa-sama! Please allow us to retreat before the Beni-hime slaughters us all!"

He giggled erratically, staring straight at the thing that my body had become. I had no horns but four red circles on my forehead hid behind the bangs of my flaming hair. The color withered for a moment before a fresh roll of scarlet dyed it again. My eyes went from polished gold to red hot iron in a second.

"Even Oni have no choice but to run from a tsunami or erupting volcano," he admitted. He jumped high and the other Oni began fleeing through the forest.

A maniacal laugh filled the air, one that came from my body.

"None of you are getting away!" she sliced the air with the Imperial Chrysanthemum, a river of demonic energy flowing from the blade. After a second of twirling in a cyclone it solidified and took the form of a great dragon, blinded just as I had seen.

It charged through the forest, sweeping aside trees like children's blocks, catching Oni in its jaws and claws, tearing them apart. 'Stop!' I screamed, tears budding in my eyes even though I wasn't the one in there. 'Please, enough!'

The dragon turned around, letting two Oni escaping; my golden eyed brother and the younger one with short purple hair.

The dragon circled in the air above me before perching on the ground in a neat hoop.

"Tch, stupid girl," she held the blade out and the dragon evaporated, returning to the blade.

"Ayame?"

I looked behind myself before she even turned my head. Hinata was approaching me uncertainly.

"Half Oni child," my voice greeted with unconcealed rage. "You have kept me roped up for too long,"

Hinata stood petrified. "Beni-hime-sama, I implore you, please let go of my sister,"

"Ha-hah-hah! It's not me who pushed her out, rather she who let herself be pulled under. This body is mine now,"

Hinata threw herself to the ground, prostrating herself. "Please, give her one more chance, give me one more chance! I promise I won't hide you from her anymore, I promise you that she will learn to cope with you!"

I didn't understand what she was saying. I realized though that she'd been keeping a secret from me, a heavy burden that wasn't hers to hold.

"I've been living as a ghost for hundreds of years and in that time I have yet to meet a host who would allow me to surface without losing herself." She paused, neglecting to say that I was the first at that very moment. "Even this child whose blood is strong and pure won't be able to stand me for long. She's the same as her mother, a beautiful form to hide a weak mind; a flower that wilts away in my hands, just a fleeting moment of terrible allure."

"Then what was that dialogue just a moment ago?" Kazama challenged. "Arguing with yourself? It sounded to me like you were addressing someone else."

'Kazama!' I cried. 'Don't!'

"Be quiet." She commanded, though I didn't know who she was directing it at.

Kazama glared at her, fearless. I really admired that about him. He never showed his fear.

She bolted to him and I nearly let go. I was afraid that if I did I'd never be able to return to my body again.

"Red eyed Oni, tell me, why do you risk your life knowingly to defend this girl?"

"I trust her," he answered and I held on tighter. I felt my heart beat stronger and I thought I would have blushed if I could.

"Ha-ha, how very funny," she retorted dryly. "Tell me, would you mourn if this girl never returned?"

Kazama nodded. "I would,"

She chuckled, laying her hand against the precise spot where Hijikata's blade had pierced his chest. "That's too bad; she'll be mourning you first,"

She pinned him against a lucky tree that had escaped the dragon's wrath. 'Kazama!'

He grimaced, still meeting her gaze with an intense glower.

"Why do you not show me your fear?" she shook him before slamming him against the tree again, like a rabid dog.

"Because I trust her!" he repeated, breathless from having the wind knocked out of him.

"Don't kid with me!" she screamed angrily, "Let's see how you fair when I pluck your eyes out,"

She reached, slowly positioning her fingers around his eye socket. He didn't blink, just stared soulfully into my eyes. Did he see me?

"One . . . two . . . !"

'NO!'

I buried my hands in her crimson hair, bleaching it where my ghostly grip touched. I pulled as hard as I could and she shrieked.

She let go of Kazama and spun in a circle, trying to buck me. I steeled myself and the red colored my soul. Her power was leaking back into me. With one last swing I felt myself merge back into my body.

I collapsed, drained of energy. My white hair blanketed the ground like snow.

Tch. Do you like that red eyed Oni?

'I do.' I wasn't quite sure what kind of like it was but I'd been able to pull myself together when he was in danger.

I like him too,

"You can't have him," I sighed aloud. I was on the edge of consciousness, the red sky above me fading away. "You can't have him . . ."

* * *

><p>"Mai, don't cry, she didn't mean to,"

Someone familiar sobbed loudly. "She choked it to death; she felt it struggling for its life!"

A deep sigh, "She just can't control her own strength yet,"

"_Even so, she killed the poor rabbit," she cried, sniffing. "She's his child,"_

"_She's my daughter now. Together, we'll raise her to respect life,"_

"_How can she? She's cursed with the same Red Maple Princess as I am and the blood of that bastard,"_

Tears stained my hot cheeks and a cool hand wiped them away. I was still half in the dream.

"_She will grow up and she will be the leader of the Agano. She'll bring unity among the demons, the half demons, and the humans. When Agano's bloody history is cleansed, peace and prosperity will reign and there will be at least one place in this land where it doesn't matter what you are." _

"_Koi, you have a strange view of these matters. How can you hope for such when you've slain more demons than any other?"_

"Seaweed Head, you awake?"

I opened my eyes, blurred by heavy tears.

My forehead didn't hurt and I touched it suspiciously. I was met with the iris root cream and frowned. I hadn't even noticed its smell until now, mixed with blood. I bumped my hand against something immovable and fingered it curiously.

"Uwah, gross," I muttered, tongue sticking to the rough of my mouth. "What the hell?"

Kazama laughed tiredly and I realized it was midday. I tried to push myself up but there was no strength in my arms. "What happened afterwards?" I rolled my head to catch sight of him and noticed he looked as tired as he sounded. "Panda eyes?"

He flashed a subdued smile. "What do you remember?"

"Why is that the first thing you ask me? Either that or 'How's your head?' it's really annoying."

"Well, considering you're prone to forgetting things,"

I closed my eyes, fighting the memories of things I'd wanted to forget, things I'd made myself forget. "I remembered more than I bargained for yesterday. Tell me what happened after I regained control,"

Kazama offered me his hand and pulled me up to rest against his shoulder. It was awkward but it was all I could do.

"Your uncle," he started. I already knew what he was going to say. The tears spilled down my face. "He was already cold when we found him,"

Found him amongst the carnage I'd wrecked. "Did it look like he suffered?"

Kazama didn't respond, the surest answer. I trembled, feeling torn on the inside between intense sorrow and raw anger. He offered me a rectangular box and I opened it with failing strength. Gorou-Oji's ponytail, folded and wrapped with a white braided cord.

I closed it and held it to my chest, trying to tame the wail rising in my chest.

"Shh," he murmured softly in my ear. He squeezed my shoulder and drew me against his chest, gently stroking my spine through tangled white hair. I bawled, unable to care that I was staining his yukata with my tears.

"Let it out," he encouraged, "no use holding it in,"

And so I did. It felt like hours had passed when I finally cried myself out, hiccoughs clogging my throat. "You're extremely patient," I managed.

He patted my head and leaned back, picking up a teapot and cup. "You have no idea," I wriggled but he kept me still with an arm around my waist. He poured a cup of cold tea with the other and handed it to me. "Drink,"

I drank deeply, my headache lessening with each gulp. He filled my cup after I drained it and I took my time sipping it this time. I noticed the door was closed and was about to ask for him to open it, then remembered the forest I loved so much was destroyed as though clear cut for about a hundred feet.

I slumped; laying my ear against his chest, listening to his heart beat steadily. I was glad he couldn't hear mine. "The Beni-hime may have been in control of my body but it was me who the dragon was obediently obeying." Kazama stretched his leg slightly, balancing my weight. "I didn't realize it at first because it seemed like she was the one controlling it with the sword,"

"So that's why the dragon came back,"

"Uh-m. Now that I think about it I probably should have let it eat him." I should have. One less trouble to come back and bite me in the ass.

"But that wouldn't have been what you wanted," Kazama reasoned.

"What does it matter? Twelve Oni before now and three men, plus those two from last week. How many yesterday?"

He answered. "Eight,"

"I had a dream, or rather a flashback. Oka-san was crying. I'd caught and killed a rabbit with just my hands." I paused. I didn't feel like weeping over it, which surprised me. "She called us cursed,"

Hinata's footfalls sounded and I crawled out of Kazama's lap, sitting up straight with difficulty. He seemed to understand that I had something important to say to her and let me go unassisted, though a shoulder to support myself on was a nice idea.

The door slid open and Hinata let herself in, avoiding my eyes. A peek outside revealed the forestless yard.

Unexpectedly, the first thing Hinata did was bow before me. "I'm sorry; please forgive me for being inexcusably incompetent."

I already felt guilty, though I wasn't about to forgive her, not until I had some answers. "I know people have secrets that they don't want to share, but we're sisters, I've never held anything back from you, not that there's ever been anything for me to hold back. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I thought I could protect you if you remained unaware, though I see now that it was self justification. When you were younger it was impossible to explain it to you and after you killed the Oni from the pass I was afraid. While you suffered rebound from using the Hime's power prematurely I sealed her without thinking about the consequences.

"The seal I used was only one way and disrupted the flow of your inner youki. The Beni-hime slumbered but your own powers suffered. The fever from the past few days was the result of years of pent up energy." She confessed.

"When did you figure that out?" Kazama snorted.

"When the seal broke yesterday and the Beni-hime rampaged. Nothing else could have broken it,"

"That's not what broke it," I interrupted. I felt discontentment building in my chest. Why did she always try to lead the conversation? Even bowing she pulled me which ever way she wanted to.

Hinata perked up. "How do you know?"

"If that was the case it would have broken earlier when the fever was the worst," Kazama interjected. "She drank my blood and it stabilized,"

Before Hinata had a chance to make a face I continued. "After the Oni of the South arrived and the leading Kurosawa Oni claimed to be my brother something else broke and memories that I had suppressed surfaced," I took a steadying breath. "The Beni-hime awoke then, but the seal didn't break until she lost her temper with them. I think she could have broken the seal at anytime, given she actually wanted to."

Hinata looked at her hands. "I suppose I should explain to you what she is and why she's with you."

"She boasted that she had power that rivaled the gods," I recalled. "She wanted to show them a natural disaster."

Hinata nodded. "The Kurosawa Oni has long held her as their secret weapon. Even I don't know how they first came into contact with her. Oka-san explained to me once that it was by a pack that she stayed in this world, hosting herself in the bodies of select female Kurosawa Oni. They tried using her in war but she killed indiscriminately so they began to watch for her appearance every generation, keeping her host under strict surveillance. They even killed off the families she existed in, trying to expel her but she always watched from the afterlife, appearing whenever a strong female Oni was born.

"Oka-san was the last and lived behind bars during her childhood. It was only by chance that she escaped while being moved from an outer settlement. She ran and ran and eventually met our father while he was questing for strong demons to use in his swords. He hated demons, though he was born to a long line of half demons. He cursed that he'd been one that lived among many that died. He felt as trapped as Oka-san and there was an immediate connection.

"Oka-san was the daughter of the leader of the Kurosawa Oni; her blood was stronger than normal Oni, which was why she was chosen and why she was imprisoned. Otou-san was in a similar predicament. As a direct descendant of the first Agano leader, Agano Ryuuji, he was blessed with unnatural strength and spiritual power, the perfect balance between human and youkai. But he was as cursed as he was blessed.

"Agano Ryuuji was born from a Yukiona and had an older human half brother. When the land of Agano was bestowed upon the two to share equally, his brother, Seiji, drank the blood of a dragon and poisoned

the land. In order to save the land and its inhabitants Ryuuji absorbed the poison and lived on in agony for years. He had only one son and one daughter. They went on to be the first leaders of the Agano and Sakurano families and their power brought more to Agano but the poison was still present through them. Their children and their children's children inherited it. As they became more and more human they slowly dwindled, only one or two children surviving every generation.

"Maybe it was just ambition when he joined with our mother, but I believe that they grew to love each other despite their differences. I was born after many, many, tries, weak but alive. I grew up, faintly understanding that I was lucky and that I probably wouldn't ever have another sibling. However, when I was six, Oka-san went missing and Otou-san left me in the care of Ichirou-jiji and Gorou-oji-san. Months passed and whispers went around the village that they'd never return, but on a snowy day they both returned, Oka-san's belly swollen. She was never really the same after that. She cried a lot and easily became angry.

"I was ten when she told me that we were only half siblings. Her mind was going and the Beni-Hime frequently imposed. She liked to tease me, uttering cruel words. We both knew that you were the next she'd roost in and Oka-san told me what she could so that I'd be able to help you after she died. You were too young to understand and even avoided her, clinging to Otou-san's leg instead. The Agano villagers used to joke that he'd become a mother instead of a father.

"Then, two years later, the Kurosawa Oni stormed the village. Otou-san made his last stand with Oka-san at his side. Even the Beni-hime reluctantly agreed to aid them, choosing to protect her future host from imprisonment. The villagers evacuated, though many wanted to stay and help protect their home and their leader. You jumped out of Ichirou-jiji's arms and ran back and I raced after you. When I caught up to you and pulled you back Otou-sama was bleeding heavily and had begun to unleash the souls of the demons from his short sword. The long sword was strapped around my back, the last thing he entrusted to us before the fight began. The demons from the sword attacked the Oni they were directed at and shortly turned on Otou-san. Oka-san tried to protect him and even the Beni-hime was unable to stand against their fury.

"Your insistent pulling ceased and you became limp. Beni-hime-sama had changed hosts and probably immobilized you so I could get you out of there. You were too young for her to possess, if she had she probably would have killed you. That's the only good thing about the Beni-hime; she doesn't want her host to die. That doesn't mean she'll be so forgiving to those around her. She has a legendary temper and a capricious attitude. She'll kill for fun and torture her host to the breaking point, especially if she knows there's someone she can switch to immediately afterwards."

I hadn't bargained for my parent's life story, though it made me feel slightly better that she had laid everything down for me to interpret. "What about the yellow eyed Oni from earlier and my real father?"

Hinata pursed her lips. "I don't really know too much about him, only that he was still a teenager when he came with his father that day nine years ago. I think his name was Hideo or Hideki and his father

was an Oni who had come from a different clan and assumed the name Kurosawa after marrying one of Oka-san's relatives. Oka-san told me that he had some sort of technique that allowed him to make the Beni-hime sleep. That's how he was able to overpower her and keep her for several months," she bit her lip. "He probably came to test the same technique on you and take you back to the Kurosawa."

_They'll never get me back into that cave. _

I bowed to Nee-san. "Forgive me for being angry, Nee-san. I'm glad you shared the truth with me."

"And I'm sorry for keeping it for so long, and truly thankful that you can still view me as your older sister." She shimmied forwards on her knees and touched one of my two horns with a single finger. Nee-san's hand lingered for a moment before ruffling my hair.

"Become strong, strong enough to make her submit to you,"

* * *

><p>Please review :D

"A beautiful form to hide a weak mind; a flower that wilts away in my hands, just a fleeting moment of terrible allure." That's actually part of a poem I wrote for my writing class XD

16. The Red Maple Princess

Please review :D

121 pages now in all chapters combined :D over 50 000 words~

But ugh! I hate this chapter T~T I need to watch scenes with Kazama in them to refresh my memory. I was watching the live drama's and he's so different in them XD his seiyuu has blonde hair in one :D

**Thanks to exorcist sora walker! I'm glad it made you happy!
**

Thanks to desirae668, my loyal minion, I mean reviewer XD The Beni-hime and the dragon are actually two separate things. The dragon comes from her father's katana and listens to Ayame over the Beni-hime. There'll be more on them later ;D

Thanks to SilverStarlightXD for reviewing! It's true that Saito and Shinpachi are still alive but I'm not sure if I'll have them in my story :(I'd probably have to add another couple chapters :)

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 16: The Red Maple Princess.

The temple had a long ways to go before normalcy returned. The torn

apart forest would probably be a constant reminder in the years to come.

Ayame had somewhat forgiven her sister for keeping her true identity a secret, though they still stared at each other awkwardly for a few minutes after. Hinata bowed again before leaving.

"I wish she wouldn't bow," Ayame whispered, flicking a rebellious tear away. "We're still sisters,"

"She probably thinks she no longer deserves to be called your older sister," I provided. I still thought her explanation had been lacking but I hadn't been able to find a way to interrupt.

She stretched out on the futon, resting her chin on her forearm. "It's not like it mattered that much,"

I scoffed. "What was it you said the other day? You were afraid of being one or the other, of both, and of neither?"

She faced away from me. "I only had thoughts like those after you came."

"Why?"

"Because," she whined, "I was used to being the strongest so it didn't matter what I was. I'm not completely stupid though, it was obvious that you were way stronger in truth and I was jealous. I was afraid of being left behind,"

"You're just like a child,"

"I am a child. Fifteen years is like blinking for the Beni-hime,"

I sighed and filled her tea cup again. "So what? The Beni-hime's just an old hag with a temper,"

"Careful what you say, she can hear you,"

"Tch," how offputting. "She can't be that great if a little snot like you could force her out,"

She giggled, combing through her hair with her fingers. She didn't get far. "How long is my hair going to be like this?"

"Until your horns finish setting," I answered.

"Ugh, how long is that going to take?"

"Another day at most," I laid her tea cup next to the head of her futon and she propped herself up, taking a sip.

"Good, I need to go to Agano as soon as possible," her eyes fell on the box with her uncle's hair. She stared at it for a moment before locating the Imperial Chrysanthemum and its matching kodaichi.

"Why in such a hurry?" I asked.

"I have to tell them about Oji-san. I also need to ask the smithy about the swords. Agano's in the West so you can have the Douji-giri

repaired. Maybe you should go home too,"

I snorted; she made me sound like a kid who'd ran away from home.
"I'm not exactly welcome at home right now,"

She startled, curiously gazing at me. "Why?"

I shrugged. "I went against their wishes and came here to fight,"

"Ja, why not stay with your friend, Amagiri?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" I teased. It hurt in the strangest way.

She pursed her lips, "Not particularly,"

"Does it have anything to do with the Beni-hime?"

"Hah?"

"Before you blacked out yesterday you said yesterday 'You can't have him,' twice, unless I heard wrong,"

Her cheeks colored. "I don't remember,"

I balanced my elbow on my knee, chin in the palm of hand. A crooked smile played on my lips. She remembered.

"Ho? Is that so?" I exaggerated a relieved breath. "What a relief, that means I don't have to thank you for saving my life yet again,"

"Hah? You haven't even said thanks once yet," she exclaimed.

"I have," I defended.

"When?"

I had to think for a moment. I hadn't really outright said it, not that I could remember at least. "I don't remember,"

"You hypocrite!" she was one too.

"Thank you," I had a feeling I had said it; maybe not as plainly.

The pink blush was stark in contrast to her white hair and skin and under kimono. "You're very welcome," she muttered shyly.

It was impossible not to pick on her when she replied like that. "So, why couldn't she have me?"

"She was going to yank your eyes out!" she sputtered. "Who knows what else she would have done,"

I chuckled. I preferred not to ponder that. Her fingers, the Beni-hime's, pressing on my skin was enough to set off every primal instinct I had. It was a feeling I wasn't keen to have again, one that so clearly expressed complete and utter defeat. The only thing

that kept me from bowing before her was the fact that she was still Ayame.

She finished the tea and uncertainly touched her horns again, feeling the raw points. They'd eventually soften into smoother tips.

Two swollen red dots above her inner eyebrows had formed and I reached to touch them. She flinched, giving me the evil eye.

"What's that? Don't tell me, more horns,"

I snickered. "How unusual,"

She looked a bit panicked. "In what way?"

"Female Oni usually only ever have one set of horns, if any at all," I doubted Chizuru had her horns yet. She probably couldn't even pseudo teleport. I wondered if upbringing affected it.

"Two sets is the most, right?"

I rumbled quietly. "Two is the most,"

She relaxed. "What a relief,"

I dragged the folded comforter over, spreading it across her back.

"You're being awfully nice," she remarked. Ayame tried to pull her hair out from under the cover but couldn't even strain her arms to work so I helped despite the peeved look on her face.

"It's a knotted mess," she complained. "It'll take forever to comb out,"

I appraised her long white hair. It probably would. "Want me to?" I offered.

She jolted, gauging my face for sincerity. "If you're gentle,"

"Alright," I only had to look in the nearest pile of junk for a comb. She was already turning this room into a junkyard.

"Start at the bottom, you'll only make it worse if you try to pull the knots down from the top,"

I complied, scooting away from her to stretch her hair to its full length.

It was incredibly silky, most the tangles came apart with a single sweep of the wooden toothed comb.

"Kazama . . . ?"

"What?" I was working on a particularly stubborn knot that kept getting tighter.

"Were you frightened?"

"Yesterday?" I paused, not sure which answer would be the best. "I was worried," she didn't immediately respond so I carried on. "Mostly that you would be lost,"

Ayame let out a soft snore and I felt my eyebrow twitch. Of course she'd fall asleep right as I said something good.

I smiled anyways, she needed her rest. I finished combing her hair and checked her temperature. It had risen slightly in response to the second set of horns. I hadn't bothered telling her that the first and second sets were usually acquired at different times. Her sister's spell had really messed with her.

I stepped outside, taking a short break. I'd been up all last night watching over her and it was starting to show.

There was a cool wind and I felt grateful for it. Rain clouds were closing in on both sides and I wondered if there'd be a storm. Rain would be nice.

The bodies of the eight Oni she'd killed had already been taken away by Hinata's shikigami but a couple dark crimson stains remained. A downpour would wash them away. Too bad the scar on the forest couldn't so easily be repaired.

Hakuouki walked down the path from the onsen, huffing. I smirked. He was a tough one all right.

He stopped to study the scene. "Hard to believe one girl could cause all that," he commented. "I find it harder to believe that you didn't recognize her true nature."

I leaned against the rail. "I thought she was when I first saw her but that damn Hinata introduced her as a half Oni."

The first raindrops began to fall, splattering on the grass and gravel.

"What will you do now, Kazama?"

I rolled my shoulders. I could guess what he was implying. "Is the bath free?"

"It is," Hakuouki folded his arms, beginning to walk past. "Careful, if you show too much interest after suddenly finding out about her true colors she'll think you're shallow." I caught an amused quirk on his lips and nodded seriously.

I wouldn't be making that mistake again.

* * *

><p>I walked back from the bath in the rain; pleasantly cool after the hot springs.<p>

I dried my hair on the deck outside Ayame's room, occasionally being spattered by windblown water droplets.

Ayame was still asleep by the sounds of it. Probably not for long, I doubted she'd be able to sleep through the pain after her second pair

of horns cut through. It was only from pure mental and physical exhaustion that she hadn't yesterday.

The sun was setting again, completely differently from the one just a day before. Hard to imagine that so much had changed without feeling like it had. Maybe it just hadn't sunk in yet.

I entered Ayame's room. I was used to it by now, the mess and her sleeping with her mouth parted. What a kid.

The very tips of her smaller horns had poked through, drawing blood that dyed parts of her messy bangs red. I dabbed on the iris root cream. She'd have to make more soon.

I'd forgotten that she could sleep through most anything. Her fever had worsened and I wrung a cloth out to lay on the top of her head. Her horns were inconveniently in the way.

I turned to light the oil lamp with the matches I'd stolen from her other room. Ayame caught my arm and I nearly spilled the oil.

"You smell delicious,"

I whipped around to face her, her red eyes eerily consuming the darkness nearby.

"What are you doing?" I growled.

She raised a single finger to her curved lips. "Sh, you'll wake her up,"

I noted that her hair was still white and frowned.

The Beni-hime crawled out of bed, grinning proudly. "Don't look so mad, it's only a partial possession. You should be thanking me instead. She gets to rest peacefully while I put up with this pain,"

I sat, unable to move, as she walked on her hands and knees towards me.

"What do you want?"

She let loose a peal of soft laughter. "I just want to be loved,"

What a major personality change, I thought dryly.

She held my shoulder weakly and I realized she only had Ayame's strength at the moment. I let my guard down just a bit.

She craned her neck, trying to capture my lips.

"Whoa," I warned, holding her away. "What are you trying to accomplish?"

Her sweet facade disappeared and she glowered at me. "Tch, you don't want to kiss this girl? I overestimated your relationship,"

I almost snickered but had to pry her hands from my yukata first.

"What do you want?"

"Hmm? I just thought it'd be fun to taint you behind her back,"

I paled, keeping her insistent hands away from me. She couldn't possible mean _that_.

She tried to lead my hands to her collar and I hastily let go, only to grab them back when she loosened it anyways.

"Will you behave?" I hissed.

"Oh? No way. Definitely not. I especially won't stop after being told to,"

I struggled to come up with a method to distract her. "Is there anything else you want?"

Her eyes burned brighter. Maybe there was something, or maybe she had been waiting for that. "Promise to give it to me?"

I had a bad feeling about this. "Tell me what it is first,"

She harrumphed. "No,"

It couldn't be any worse than her current proposal. Why didn't I just tie her up or something? It wasn't like she could use her power currently. But I could feel the heat of her, Ayame's, fever and exhaled gloomily.

"I promise,"

She flashed her teeth, canines visibly elongated. A shiver ran down my spine. "I want to taste your blood for myself,"

I unconsciously gripped my arm where Ayame had bitten me.

She chortled at my reluctant expression. "Don't be shy; I'm sure you're as tasty as you claim,"

So she'd heard that? My skin crawled as I held my arm out for her. She ignored it and cuddled up to my chest, pawing it through the fabric.

"Just a taste, right?"

"Sure," she purred. She slid her hand inside my yukata, slipping it off my shoulder.

I trembled as she placed her lips on my neck, needle points teasing my flesh. She squeezed the muscle in my arm playfully and I tensed. She chose that moment to sink her fangs in.

It stung even more than when Ayame had bitten me and burned cold. I gasped as she pulled her teeth out, mouth still around the wound.

She swallowed the first mouthful and waited for a second to fill. It should have been healing but it wasn't. She encouraged a third with needy lapping at the punctures.

I rocked back, head hitting the floor with a soft thump. She had one hand buried in my hair while the other explored my chest, mauling me with her nails.

"You said . . . you just wanted a taste," I reminded her distantly. I felt dizzy and suspected it had to do with her. Was she poisonous? Just what was the Beni-hime?

She unwillingly separated from my neck and perched on my chest, tattooed knees showing.

"Umai! Thank you for the meal,"

I felt her warm palms on my chest again, trailing across my shoulders and down my sides. I suppose I felt a little violated.

"Stop . . . frisking me!"

She cackled. "You tasted better than I expected,"

"Good for you," I retorted. My head was beginning clearing.

She caressed my face, forcing me to meet her eyes. A trail of blood from the protruding bone white horns ran down the bridge of her nose and across her cheeks. I'd wipe it away when she got bored and decided to leave.

She inclined over me, deeply inhaling. "You're the perfect match for Ayame-chan," she murmured above my ear, breath fluttering in my hair. "I wish I could have you to myself," she licked the rim of my ear and bit the lobe, a guilty ripple spreading from the sensation.

The Beni-hime yawned and promptly collapsed, putting both Ayame and I in a rather uncomfortable position. Well, not terribly uncomfortable.

I wrapped my arms around her tiny waist, loathing getting up. Ayame's fever had softened and her chest rhythmically filled and emptied, a quiet breeze in my ear. I argued that a short rest was called for after being molested but knew I could easily fall asleep like this.

That wouldn't have been so bad if I was confident that I could wake up before she did, or someone decided to interrupt. Usually Chizuru did and interpreted it too perversely. There was no way this could be mistaken, naturally at least.

Unfortunately, it was the Beni-hime's doing and I nimbly sat up, careful not to wake Ayame. She easily folded up in my arms and didn't stir, like she fit perfectly there. I tucked her back into bed, wiping the blood on her face away with the discarded damp cloth from earlier.

The sliding door rattled open. "Kazama-san! What happened to your neck?"

I absently fixed my yukata. I wasn't bleeding anymore so I wouldn't get blood on the light colored yukata. The wound was still there, proof that the Beni-hime had bitten me.

"The Beni-hime possessed her again,"

Hinata let an audible intake of worry pass. "She bit you?"

I held a hand over the mark, "Yeah,"

"You don't feel ill or anything?"

I studied her for a moment. She still looked like someone who was hiding things. "I did at first but I'm fine now,"

Hinata seated herself just inside the room. "You shouldn't let her bite you too often if it becomes a habit of hers to possess Ayame while she rests."

I scoffed. "I only let her have her way this time because it benefited Ayame,"

"Even so, you're lucky that she didn't poison you,"

"Explain," I demanded. "You know more about the Beni-hime than you let on earlier,"

"Ayame has to learn by herself; otherwise the Hime will never accept her." Hinata replied curtly. She was trying to act godly again.

I couldn't understand her, though I had a nagging feeling she wasn't as evil as I wanted to think. "Tell me then,"

Hinata bit her lip uncertainly. "I'll warn you that her teeth are coated in something more potentially deadly than silver. She's venomous, though she can probably control it. You're lucky she didn't decide to kill you,"

I guess I was lucky she thought I was good for Ayame. She hadn't injected me with poison or anything and probably even sucked out whatever was on her teeth when she drank from my neck. "So, that's why Ayame's immune to silver?"

"That would appear to be the reason," she agreed. "The Beni-hime usually doesn't begin possessions until her host is older so the Kurosawa Oni tests their young children for immunity to silver. The main family was the only family that escaped purging years ago when they first tried to get rid of the Beni-hime. As such, all the Oni born into that family are immune to silver."

"It's not just the host?"

"The first Beni-hime was supposedly the wife of the head Kurosawa Oni at the time. Her children were born immune to the same poison she had and so forth. As the Beni-hime switched from family to family, following wherever the blood was strongest, the same thing happened." Hinata explained. "I think those families that had previously hosted the Beni-hime were wiped out not because they feared the Hime returning, but rather the main family was afraid of being overthrown."

"Being immune to silver is quite a valuable trait," I mused. "I'm surprised the Kurosawa hasn't played that card to entice more

families to pledge their daughters to them."

Hinata stared at me blankly. I'd forgotten she was as uninformed as her sister. They were similar in that regard.

"Currently, as a method to prevent our species from going extinct, families propose strict marriage agreements. Take my family as an example." I paused, wondering if it even mattered. "We're small but we still have a head and remain the most prominent family in the West. My oldest brother, the next head, is promised the first daughter of the Amagiri household. Similarly, the first daughter in my family is promised to the youngest son of the Shiranui clan."

"So, what about you?" she inquired. "Is anybody promised to you?"

I scowled. "Usually the eldest gets that privilege. The youngest in the Shiranui got the chance because the eldest eloped and the middle son is a loose cannon."

"Then why not marry my sister?"

I sputtered. Did she ever speak delicately?

"The Beni-hime's troublesome but she sleeps a lot. On the plus side, you'd have heirs that are immune to silver and a super cute wife,"

I shook my head. Did she have to add that last part? "Speak honestly, why are you trying to marry your sister off?"

Hinata gazed intently at her younger half sister, her brown eyes as solid as polished wood. "There are a lot of reasons. What I said last time was mostly true; staying here on this mountain really isn't the best option for her. As her sister I want her to see the world outside and enjoy many, many, sights. But, if she leaves she'll just end up a pawn for the Kurosawa or even the Agano. She's strong but she's a bit naïve,"

"A bit?" I interjected. "I've seen mountain monkey's with more sense than she has,"

Hinata giggled a little, not offended in the least. "I wouldn't have to worry if she married you. You'd keep her in line but still let her enjoy herself. She wouldn't have to worry about the Agano or the Kurosawa either,"

I snorted. "I'm just a rogue Oni. There'd be no benefit for her if she married me,"

"I spoke to Amagiri-san a few days ago," she confessed. "He told me to pass on a message for him. 'Your mother won't stay angry at you for long,' or so he says,"

I already knew that. Chichiue didn't seem to care one way or the other, though Hahaue casually said she'd disown me. I doubted she really would but she was definitely angry when I left.

"She wants to leave for Agano as soon as she can," I informed her.

"I know. I'm hoping a visit after all these years will refresh her memory and turn her away from their bloody methods,"

"What exactly are the Agano?"

"Mercenaries, assassins, hunters, exterminators, exorcists. They're just a bunch of murders, no longer human, demon, or otherwise." The contempt was concentrated in her voice.

"What about your uncle?" I challenged.

She appeared torn. "Uncle was an assassin. Agano's livelihood is dependent on request from people who are willing to pay for illegal services."

"Ayame knows?"

Hinata nodded. "She knows and she wants to change it. Her dream is to become the leader of the Agano and use their strength for something else."

"Then why not let her?"

She glared at me.

"You don't think she could do it?"

"It takes more than a child's dream to wipe three hundred years of blood stained history clean,"

I rolled my eyes at her. "I understand that you care for your sister but you really should loosen up and let her do her own thing," I was the last one who should have been spouting that nonsense.

She sniffed indignantly, standing to leave.

"Is Amagiri still around?" I stood, knowing the answer.

"He said he'd be waiting at the bridge at the base of the mountain. Just follow the path from the onsen straight down," she paused. "Make sure you're back before I blow out the lamps, you won't find your way back before morning if I do,"

"Sure,"

* * *

><p>Please review :D

I haven't really thanked all the people who have added my story to their favorites and alerts yet T~T I'm such an awful person. Anyways, thanks to the people who have added my story to either and to both! I hope you're all still reading!~

'Chapter 17: Leaving the mountain' comes out on Friday, so don't forget!

****Please review :D sorry this came out so late but I've been having computer issues all day long and haven't been able to get to another one thanks to a snow storm XD it cancelled school so it's all good. Right now, when I hit the publish button, it'll be nine to twelve, so it's still Friday here :P****

****Spoiler! It looks like Hanashobu will have thirty-five chapters when completed, unless I decide to add in additional scenes xP it might be bumped to forty-five depending on how difficult it is to weave the Beni-hime plot in. ****

****So far there's the Kazama and Ayame plot, the Imperial Chrysanthemum plot, the Kurosawa plot, the Agano plot, and the Beni-hime plot.****

****To silentxangel, thanks for the double review and I don't mind it being late at all! The fact that you review at all is much appreciated ^^ sorry that the last few chapters have been on the iffy side. ****

****Ayame's talent and pride is currently in her physical strength, so actually standing against the Beni-hime isn't really possible for her, at the moment. In my opinion, her father's sword is the more difficult opponent. Even the Beni-hime knows it was only obeying her because of the situation. In short, the Imperial Chrysanthemum reacts to despair and the Beni-hime reacts to chaos. Call on both of them at once and you're in for it XD her brother getting away proves that Ayame doesn't have the will to kill.****

****As for her sister. I'm not trying to be mean to Hinata but she truthfully is in the wrong. She's just as naive as Ayame and shouldn't be trying to act like the adult when she's just a child with fake power. I was going to include Hinta's plotline but I have a feeling the plot bunnies are breeding too much anyways x.x****

*** * ***

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 17: Leaving the mountain.

I was irritated and restless. I'd had to spend an extra day in bed thanks to the weird Oni transformation.

Currently, I was soaking in the indoor spring, my back set against the smooth and hot rock ledge.

I was ready to leave the mountain the moment I got out of the bath. I had packed two yukata and one kimono, my hairpins, one of Takeshi-sama's casual robes (Kazama hadn't packed yet, neither did it appear he would), plus a lot of dried snacks and one bottle of pickled onions. Oji-san's hair too. I'd wear my father's swords there and the yukata I had prepared to wear.

I was comfortable with calling him my father again. So what if he wasn't my father by blood? He was still the man who raised me and taught me the basics of sword fighting. Overall, I still didn't care about my Kurosawa blood. I was going to be just Agano Ayame from now on. Miyaki was too pure a name for someone like me.

I stood, grabbing a thick white towel to dry myself off. It was hard to believe that such a stick thin body belonged to a murderer.

The past few days had revealed a lot but what affected me the most was knowing the exact number of people I'd killed. Twenty-three and I wasn't even sixteen yet. My stomach gurgled uneasily; I hadn't eaten much since then.

How many had the Beni-hime slaughtered? She didn't answer and I breathed a breath of relief. She'd been quiet since I got up yesterday morning.

I dressed quickly in a light purple yukata with wisteria branches on the sleeves, around the hem, and on the neck. It wasn't my favorite.

I hadn't spoken or even seen Kazama yet which was rare. I was up before breakfast so maybe he was still sleeping.

Stepping out of the bath house I took a breath of fresh air. I hated how humid it was in there.

"Enjoy your bath?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Kazama stood against a dead tree, wearing clothes that actually fit him for once.

"I did," I took in the elegant but simple white kimono and the striking black over coat. "Where'd you get the silk kimono?"

He ran a hand through his hair briskly, a very smug curve to his lips. "Amagiri brought it,"

"Why?" he had a pretty dependable friend by the sounds of it.

"I hate Western clothing."

I shrugged. "I thought you looked cool, even if you were half dead,"

He scoffed and crossed his arms in the roomy sleeves. He walked beside me on the way back to the shrine and I took in the golden geometric pattern on the collar of the black haori. He wore a red and black checkered nagajuban under the kimono.

There was no way he wasn't warm with the sun beating down. What a peacock.

"Did you say something?"

I must have accidentally breathed that aloud. "Not a thing,"

* * *

><p>We left after saying goodbye to Chizuru and Hakuouki. Kazama surprised me by advising him to stay off the battlefield and settle down. Hijikata called him a sly bastard and hoped he'd never see his face again.<p>

Nee-san didn't see us off. I put it out of my mind, hoping I didn't

cry over it randomly during the trip.

Sometime later we were waiting at a village dock for a simple passenger ship to arrive.

"I'd almost forgotten this smell!"

Kazama crinkled his nose. A few men on the wharf over were gutting fat fish.

"It's the sea!" I called to the open waters, laughing as a few gulls squawked overhead, as though telling me to shut up.

"You're such a kid," Kazama chided.

The passenger ship was in sight and I fought the urge to jump up and down excitedly. "I haven't been on a boat since Nee-san and I stowed away all those years ago,"

"Stowed away?" he questioned.

"We didn't have money back then," I felt my purse, heavy with coins and bills. "I feel like I'm going home!"

"You consider Agano your home even though you've spent more time here?"

"Naturally! It is where I was born. I still have a few fond memories of the village." The boat would soon be docking. "You should see it; it's the most beautiful place ever,"

Kazama shrugged, "I'll have to. I don't trust leaving the Douji-giri in human hands,"

I scowled at him. "Agano isn't like that. It's a rich village despite their dwindling numbers." The smithy wouldn't steal a single demon blade when he could probably make a dozen in a good year. I faintly remembered the old man as being very friendly and fair.

"We'll be in the Kyoto area for the last week of Gion," Kazama mused.

"Kyoto? Where's that?" I asked.

His mouth actually dropped. "You can't be serious. You've never even heard of Kyoto?"

I nodded. "Is it famous or something?" I felt embarrassment creeping up on me.

"It's only the largest city in the West," he snorted.

"Ho? So lots of people live there?" it sounded like an interesting place. "What's Gion?"

"It's a human festival that lasts the whole month of July," he explained patiently. "I knew you were detached from society but I never would have expected this,"

I mostly ignored him after he said festival, though I was vaguely

aware of him taking a dig at me. What kind of festival lasted a whole month? Was there lots of food? Entertainment?

"Hey, can we go to Kyoto, even if it's just for a day?"

He chuckled and roughly patted my head, deliberately messing up my bangs. "Are you sure? I thought you wanted to go to Agano as soon as possible?"

I chewed on my lip. "Well, a day couldn't hurt,"

The boat had docked and I shouldered my travel pack. Kazama wasn't carrying anything, not like he had anything to bring anyways.

"Agano's south of Kyoto, we could take a short break there" he remarked.

I balked, "Eh? How do you know where Agano is?"

His lips turned up. "Your sister told me since your sense of direction is apparently questionable,"

I felt my cheeks heat up, it wasn't that bad.

I flashed the slip of paper to the person at the gate and boarded, holding the rail firmly. My knees were already rubbery. Kazama followed confidently.

The deck was clean but worn. Even the seats were looking worse for wear with plump cushions hiding splintering wood. I took a seat and leaned over the side, eyeing the twinkling water below.

The weather was nice, though a little too sunny. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and my dark hair felt hot already.

Kazama took a seat next to me and the few people who got on after us stayed well away.

"Your hair color is a handy thing," I praised. I didn't particularly like having humans too close to me, not when they stared at my eyes unabashedly.

He passed his fingers through his hair again and I rolled my eyes at him. Wearing nice clothes had boosted his already inflated ego. I guess it was because he was back in his comfort zone.

I felt like I was swaying too far to the right. "Are you accustomed to boats?"

"There's a lake near my home and we own a couple boats, though they're nothing like this type of boat. The water's calmer as well,"

"I've never even learned how to swim," I admitted. I hadn't been near enough to a body of water that could be swum in to learn. I didn't think many women learned how to anyways.

"I'll have to rescue you if you fall overboard then," he grinned slightly, imagining it probably.

I harrumphed indignantly. "You'd watch me flounder for your own enjoyment first."

He smiled. "I wouldn't,"

"You definitely would," I grumbled, jabbing at him and nearly falling out of my seat and on to the floor.

He steadied me with a firm hand around my elbow. "If you do fall over I probably will laugh,"

I wouldn't be standing near the rails anytime soon.

* * *

><p>The boat trip was overnight since it wasn't just from Hokkaido or Ezo (I didn't care what they called it. It was Takeshi-sama's land anyways,) to Honshu. The trip would take us a fair ways down the Western Coast.<p>

If I thought being on deck was bad, the inside was even worse. There were 'bunks' that were more like closets with two raised wooden beds in each. They were cozy enough.

Clunk!

"Itai!" I rubbed my forehead, seeing stars for a moment.

"Don't knock yourself out, Seaweed Head,"

I crawled into the bunk, massaging my bruised skull and pride. "I didn't mean to, the boat just suddenly rocked,"

"Get used to it," Kazama was in the other bunk across from me, head touching one wall and feet touching the other. He looked ridiculous.

There was a curtain for the bunk and I curiously tugged on it. It came open with a pleasant swish. I pulled it across then folded it back in place, then tugged it open again.

"Stop playing with it," Kazama scolded. "It's annoying,"

I huffed and quietly traced the lines in the wooden planks above my head. "Did your friend Amagiri leave yesterday?"

Kazama rolled on his side, bending his knees to fit more comfortably. "He thought he'd inform my family that I'm alive and well, seeing as they haven't heard from me since early June,"

"That long? I'd have given up and called you a goner,"

He smirked. "Amagiri went to visit my older brother a week ago and discovered that my room had been gutted,"

I giggled. "They seem to have very little faith in you,"

He glared. "My mother just likes to be extreme."

I lay down on my side, facing him. "You must love your family very much,"

"Why do you think that?"

His bangs were tilted with his head, revealing thin blonde eyebrows that were naturally and subtly arched. I felt jealous; mine were just straight lines, almost too thick straight lines that tapered just slightly. I didn't have the patience to sculpt them like some women did.

I almost forgot that he'd said anything but his eyebrows quirked impatiently. He'd reprimand me for staring too long. "I don't know. Intuition?"

He rolled his eyes and hunkered down, stripping off his haori.

I stifled a yawn and pulled the curtain again.
"Goodnight,"

"Goodnight," he returned.

It seemed like the waves lulled me to sleep even before I settled comfortably.

* * *

><p>"Wake up,"<p>

I groaned and flipped over, forgetting where I was. I tumbled off the wooden bed and sprawled on the floor with a disgruntled 'oomph'. Not the most graceful awakening I'd ever had.

Kazama helped me up, his chest rattling from a dampened laugh.

"Is it time to get off yet?" I couldn't tell the time in the dim cabin. I hoped it was.

"Not yet,"

"Can't I just go back to sleep then?" I whined.

"It's a long journey to Kyoto. You'll regret starting the day groggily,"

"That's exactly why I should go back to sleep," I defended.

He was unsympathetic. "Stop complaining and stand up straight,"

I hadn't realized I was still being supported by Kazama and quickly picked up my pack, opening the Western door outwards. I absently fixed my yukata as I went, spreading out a couple wrinkles.

I half stumbled up the stairs to the deck and then shielded my eyes from the intense morning sun.

A few passengers were already up. I took a seat, the last one that didn't have smoke from the engine blowing above it.

There was a small, frail, woman sitting two seats away in a faded

navy kimono. Her little boy seemed tired but squirmed in her lap anyways. They both looked haggard and I felt a pang of pity for them.

Kazama sat next to me, the Douji-giri smoothly taken from his belt and propped against his shoulder, just as I had done with my two Imperial Chrysanthemums.

The woman flinched away ever so slightly, gathering her child in her arms. Her eyes were terribly young and anxious.

I rifled through my bag, taking out a container with sticks of dried deer meat. I held one out for Kazama and he accepted it reluctantly.

The little boy looked over and I thought his face might have looked just bit too thin.

I reached over Kazama and offered the box of jerky for them to take some. The boy grabbed two greedily and caught my eyes with a begging look. I smiled encouragingly and he took another without an ounce of guilt. His mother hesitantly took one after I jiggled the container at her.

I chewed on one myself, watching the Western Coast come closer and closer. I enjoyed the tough, smoky, meat.

"Junta, sit down," the woman whispered, tugging on the boy's arm.

"Ka-chan, there's the beach!"

"Yes, Ka-chan sees it too, now please sit down,"

He continued standing on the bench looking over the railing at the approaching shoreline. He bopped up and down, balancing his belly against the support.

The words were on the tip of my tongue, 'Be careful, you'll fall,' when he tipped over the edge.

"Junta!"

I sprung to my feet, pulling her back before she could fall after him.

"Kazama," he was standing, looking down into the water with apprehensive eyes. The little boy, Junta, hadn't surfaced.

Bubbles broke the surface, followed by his flailing arms.

"What the hell are you waiting for?" I snarled, shoving Kazama over with a burst of adrenaline. I was going over if he wasn't.

He hit the water with an arm over his face and was up and paddling to the sinking Junta in record time. I was impressed, he swam like a fish.

Two men came rushing to the side of the boat, throwing a ring attached to a rope. It splashed in the water next to them and Kazama

gripped it with one arm, the other preoccupied with Junta.

I took a hold of the rope with the men and pulled, Junta's mother pitching in too. It was surprisingly hard, probably because the boat was still moving. One of the men looked curiously back at me. I felt like I was doing all the work.

A couple minutes later Kazama was pulled over the side, sopping wet with a crying toddler under one arm. He wasn't holding him very well.

The boy's mother rushed forwards and took the sobbing boy into her arms, kissing his head.

"Thank you so much!"

Kazama nodded curtly and turned his sights on me, sauntering towards me with a minute smirk. He draped his arm around me, cold and salty water seeping through my yukata. I felt something slimy on the back of my neck.

"I have a present for you, Seaweed Head,"

He pulled away, leaving a long strip of kelp across my shoulder.

Disgusted, I pulled it off and slung it at him. "Kazama, you jerk!" my clothes were damp and smelled funny now.

He caught the slimy green rope and threw it overboard, a satisfied grin on his smug face. His wet bangs hung halfway down his nose, pasted there.

The men, after checking to make sure the little boy was okay, bowed to Kazama and returned to their posts. The boat ride would finally be over soon.

* * *

><p>An hour later I found myself washing Kazama's haori, kimono, nagajuban, and various belts in a slow rolling river. Kazama was just a speck up the river.<p>

He was so fickle. The path we were taking to Kyoto was interrupted by a bridge and a brook and he immediately decided he wasn't passing it by without rinsing all the salt out of his hair. It didn't end with that and I got stuck with his laundry.

I laid the clothes on a flat slate of rock, glad the weather guaranteed it to dry quickly. I was almost grateful for the foresight I had when I packed one of Takeshi-sama's yukata's.

There was a nice, warm, breeze with the barest hint of humidity. I closed my eyes and turned my nose to the wind, reading the subtle information.

I determined that there was no immediate risk of a sudden rainstorm, though one might eventually break the dry heat in another day or so.

A splash of water drew my attention and I curiously looked down into the river. It was just a glittering trout. I had been anticipating a Kappa, but I'd forgotten that the land outside Takeshi-sama's wasn't thriving with demon life.

Kazama was nowhere to be seen when I glanced up the river again and a moment of panic seized me. The deep purple yukata was gone from the rocks as well and I calmed down. He was a competent swimmer; I shouldn't have worried in the first place.

I rubbed my hand across the white silk kimono, finding it significantly dryer.

"We match,"

I scowled at him over my shoulder. The yukata he wore was darker and had grey and black birds in flocks. His hair was dripping again, hastily wrung dry with just his hands.

"No, we don't. The motif is completely different,"

He seemed surprised, or maybe confused. His taste in clothes was plain, though still elegant. I had a feeling he only understood colors and shape patterns in fashion.

"I hadn't expected you to understand such a feminine concept," he retorted.

"It's basically art, idiot," I felt just a little bit insulted. I wasn't girly but at least my perception of art wasn't off.

Kazama shrugged. "I forgot that you paint pictures on people's skins."

I huffed. That was probably the nicest way he'd ever put tattoo artistry before. "Your robes will be dry soon. How long will it take for us to get to Kyoto after this?"

"We can make it before nightfall if we don't stop after this," he judged after squinting up at the sky for a moment.

"Where will we be staying?" I inquired.

"Hopefully in the Gion district, I'm familiar with some of the inns. If not, there's a few just a couple minutes outside of Gion,"

I pondered that for a moment. "Gion is a festival and a place?"

"That must be a difficult idea for someone like you," he taunted. I wanted to punch him.

I checked his clothes again, relieved that it was finally dry. "Alright, let's go already!" I threw the pile of expensive silk's and cotton's at him, bounding back to the bridge.

Impatiently, I waited at the bridge for him to catch up. After about five minutes he appeared, the yukata folded neatly. I stuffed it into my pack, about to sling the bag over my shoulder again when Kazama took it for me.

"What?" I asked, perplexed. Was he actually being considerate for next to no reason?

"How far can you 'skip' before you get tired?"

The corner of my mouth twitched; an uneven grin. "I don't know. I've never gotten tired from running around on the mountain before,"

"You better keep up then,"

* * *

><p>I hated this chapter x.x I hadn't thought enough about what happened in between leaving the mountain and arriving in Kyoto x.x actually, I hate this part of the story period :P

'Chapter 18: The last week of Gion' comes out on the fourteenth so don't forget! If chapter nineteen is finished for the day after I'll have a regular Wednesday update too, but don't count on it.

Please review! I'll be over this rough patch soon x.x

18. The last week of Gion

Please review! This is my two month anniversary and Valentine's Day! Happy S.A.D everyone XD and happy Valentine's to those who are lucky~

Thank you so much for the speedy review, silentxangel! It's always nice to wake up and find a review in my inbox. I'm glad you like the filler chapters! Takeshi-sama did appear to run away XD but don't forget that he's the land god of all Hokkaido.

I threw the peacock part in because he does do an almost hair flick a couple times throughout the anime xD other than that, I think Kazama has just a bit of an ego surrounding his looks. It's a given that he wears nice clothes ;D

As for your blessings, Ayame's a bit of a blockhead XD Kazama's going to have to be really obvious in order to get her attention.

Thanks to desirae668! I thought I'd lost you D: it feels like I've lost a few reviewers ToT

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 18: The last week of Gion.

We made it to Kyoto by sundown thanks to Ayame's insistence on not taking breaks. The only time we did stop was at a highway teahouse to have supper. She ate five sticks of dangos instead of a proper meal.

True, we had arrived, but actually making it to the Gion district in time might have been entirely impossible.

She spun, trying to see everything at once. "What's that?"

"A vendor," I replied. She'd already asked about half a dozen other common city items. This was the second time she was asking about food.

"I'm not familiar with what he's selling. Can we try it?"

"Later,"

"Please!" she begged.

I steered her away. "If the inn's reception closes before we get there we'll be sleeping in the streets."

She reluctantly looked away, catching sight of something else. "What's that grand building?"

I sighed. "It's just a bath house,"

"It's so fancy!"

Thankfully she didn't slow down again and kept pace with me. She still occasionally turned in a full circle.

"There are still so many people out and the streets are all warm and bright!"

"It's a busy time of year for the humans," that being said, I hoped the inn I had in mind still had vacancies.

* * *

><p>"Kazama Chikage-dono, it's been a while!"<p>

I nodded my head to the short old man. He was tolerably enthusiastic about his work. "Good evening, Yamata. Are there any rooms available this late into Gion?"

"You're in luck, one of our honored guests left early just this morning,"

"Just one room?"

Yamata seemed to notice Ayame for the first time. "A friend? Unfortunately it's just the one room,"

I debated for a moment. "Is there a screen divider?" it was too late to be picky.

"Of course! How long will you be staying?"

"I can't say for certain so I'll be paying by the day as usual." I answered, handing him over a handful of coins. I felt guilty for using her money.

Yamata counted the coins before handing a few back. "I'll give you a little discount, Chikage-dono,"

At Yamata's gesture a young maiko scuttled forwards. Ayame gazed at her with unabashed interest.

"Show them to their room, Wakana-chan,"

She bowed timidly, "Follow me, please,"

The apprentice geisha guided us down a long hallway, leaving us at the entry to our room. "The divider should be in the closet. If it isn't someone at the main desk will be able to get you one,"

I waved her off and entered.

"Uwah! This is amazing!"

Her excitement over every little thing was starting to get on my nerves.

"The ceiling is a work of art! Look at the designs!"

I clamped my hand over her mouth, letting a relieved breath out. She was even more talkative when something caught her attention.

"Mhmpf!"

"Will you be quiet for a minute?" I was tired and wanted a break. I hadn't told her that I was still feeling pain in my chest. The scar hadn't even disappeared yet.

I let go and checked the closet for the screen divider. It was there.

I stood it up and grabbed a futon, tossing it at Ayame. She was glaring at me, her mouth set in a stubborn pout.

"You can play tomorrow,"

She laid her futon down on the side facing the verandah, kicking it out flat. "You're so stingy,"

I scoffed at her. "You can't say you're not tired," knowing her, she hadn't noticed even if she was.

I rolled out my bedding, grateful that I could finally go to sleep.

"It's not that late; can't we go see this 'Gion' festival?"

"Go to sleep," I commanded. If she didn't I considered seriously knocking her out. The Hime might even have been easier to deal with than Ayame's hyped up self.

She poked her head around the screen, quickly retreating. I was only half undressed. Why should that have startled her?

"How am I supposed to sleep when there are so many intriguing things

to see? Like that little girl! Why was she wearing so much makeup?"

"She's a maiko, a dancing girl and an apprentice geisha. Both are entertainers and their makeup and dress distinguishes them as high ranking women here." I explained.

"What kind of entertainment?"

"Dancing, acting, music, poetry and prose; that's the general idea. They serve tea too, and sake."

"Ho?" she trailed off, already keyed down from the start of a patient lecture. She easily became bored when she wasn't the one speaking. "That's pretty amazing. Are they only here in Gion?"

"No. There are some in most big cities and even some smaller towns. In Kyoto, most reside in Gion, while their less respectable sisters stay in Shimabara." I usually stayed in Shimabara since it was cheaper.

"What's Shimabara?"

I had been hoping that her momentary silence meant she'd fallen asleep but I had no such luck. "A red light district,"

"A what?"

I laughed one-sidedly. I wondered if she knew the meaning of the word 'prostitute' or 'courtesan'. I could say both and she still wouldn't have a clue. How pure her limited knowledge of the world outside her Tengu's mountain was.

"Go to sleep already," I coaxed. "You'll want to be up bright and early tomorrow morning if you hope to see even half of the Gion festival in one day,"

She yawned. "About that . . . can we stay a day longer?"

"How we spend our time is your decision," I responded.

"Uh-m,"

After a moment of silence and no tossing and turning I cautiously peaked around the screen. She often fell asleep suddenly, just like a kid. Her resting face was one without worries, as most were.

Yet, she might have had more on her conscience than even I. She was such a simpleton, being able to push it out of her mind like that.

That was probably best. Thinking about it would just drive her mad and she'd never be able to sleep with her yukata carelessly loose again.

I settled back into bed, her still form just an arm's stretch away, if not for the divider. Her soft and rhythmic breathing helped draw me to sleep.

* * *

><p>"Honored guest, are you awake?"<p>

I sat up, groggily rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I hadn't requested any extra services. I hoped this was part of Yamata's discount.

"I'm awake," I curtly answered.

It seemed like the geisha was taking her time until she finally opened the door; two trays piled high with food at her side.

I saw through her painted on face immediately. "You," I growled lowly.

"Kazama Chikage," she tersely returned.

"I thought you were working in Shimabara?"

She flaunted her fakest smile. "I work where ever my lady wishes me to,"

Ayame shifted in her bed, followed by a long, annoyed, exhale.

She crawled to the foot of her bed and sat just within my sight, her ridiculously long hair halfway undone. Kimigiku gazed at her with rapt curiosity and Ayame stared back with much the same expression.

"Good morning," Ayame greeted uncertainly. She looked back at me with a questioning glance.

Kimigiku entered the room with our breakfast trays and brought them to us.

"I am Kimigiku," she introduced warmly, covertly assessing Ayame.

"I'm Ayame," she paused, her nose twitching just barely. "You're not a human?"

Her delicate geisha mask almost crumbled but she kept her composure. "Ah-ra, you're an observant one, aren't you?"

I contemplated if she could also smell the difference between human and Oni. We had better senses than most humans, but not to that extent. Maybe it had just been a gesture while her 'intuition' worked.

"Are you Kazama-han's betrothed?"

She blinked, the morning stupor forcing her to take a few seconds to register what Kimigiku had said.

Ayame's face turned redder than even a combination of fever and embarrassment could produce. "What? No way!" she was beyond mortified.

"Very sorry, forgive my honest mistake," Kimigiku apologized, pushing Ayame's meal towards her.

"Thank you for the meal," and she dug in without another word, her high cheekbones still a pinched red. I managed a crooked grin.

"Kazama-han, may I ask what you two are doing in Kyoto?"

I felt like telling her to mind her own business but that would have meant answering more of Ayame's questions later. "This child," I emphasized 'child', "has never seen a city before or even a festival like Gion's,"

"My, just where is she from?" which translated to 'who did you steal her from?'

"The North," Ayame provided. "Sort of,"

Kimigiku considered that carefully behind her rosy cheer. She probably wanted to ask more but felt compelled not to, whether from my presence or from Ayame's nonchalance.

She still didn't care what she was and what position it put her in. Her naïve nature kept her from realizing her blood was as pure as mine and that it implied some things.

"Where is your Imperial Demon Maiden?" I inquired.

Ayame perked up at that, chopsticks half raised to her mouth. I tasted the miso soup, satisfied with its pleasant odor.

Kimigiku's professional gaze turned sharp. "Why do you ask?"

"She wants to see Kyoto and Gion and she'd be good company for her. I wouldn't have to worry about her wandering off and getting lost somewhere either,"

Ayame indignantly huffed at me but she didn't deny the getting lost part. "I thought you were going with me?"

That was almost too endearing for me to resist an insinuating comment. "I don't like mingling with the humans; I'd rather stay here and wait,"

"You're just lazy," she accused.

Kimigiku chuckled behind her kimono sleeve. "I'll contact the Hime. She'd be delighted to speak with you, Ayame-chan,"

I didn't particularly get along with Osen or her shinobi vassal but I at least trusted her to be a good tour guide and babysitter.

The masquerading geisha left and we ate in peace, only Ayame exerted an unpleasant aura.

"Stop sulking," I chided.

"I thought you were going to go with me,"

"You'll have more fun if you go with someone less conspicuous," I bribed.

She groaned and ducked behind the screen.

"Don't go back to sleep, you'll miss your chance to go out,"

She harrumphed.

* * *

><p>Osen arrived about an hour later, her robes in perfect order.<p>

She mostly ignored me, acquainting with Ayame.

"You can call me Osen-chan,"

Ayame seemed to sink under her enthusiasm and busybody personality.
"Sure,"

"So, Ayame-chan, where do you want to go? What do you want to see first?"

Ayame pondered that for a moment. "There's lots of food that I haven't tried before,"

Of course, the first thing she thought about would be food.

"And I haven't actually seen the festival," she continued, stroking her long hair that had been tamed into a ponytail. "I don't really know. Where ever Osen-chan thinks is good,"

Osen clapped happily. "Alright! Do you have anything nicer to change into?"

Ayame's bossy and domineering attitude was for once, matched and surpassed. She looked down at her pale purple yukata. "Uh-m," she rifled through her bag, pulling out an orange kimono with scattered red and pink camellias.

"How pretty!" she turned to me. "Shoo,"

I rolled my eyes and stepped outside.

"Are you going to wear the green sash?"

"Uh-m,"

"Say, Ayame-chan," she pronounced her name slowly, as though it was much harder to say than it really was. "Why are you here with Kazama?"

"Actually, he's here with me,"

"Huh?"

"Kazama was injured at the foot of our mountain and I took care of him for a while. Now I have an errand to run south of here and he agreed to come with me. We're only stopping here for a couple of days,"

She was over simplifying things, which was good.

"Is that how it is?"

"Uh-m,"

There was a pause, interrupted only by the rustling of fine silk.

"So, what is your relationship like?" Osen asked casually. I could imagine Ayame blushing again.

"I guess we're friends,"

She exaggerated a sigh. "I see, I guess he still hasn't given up on Chizuru-chan,"

"Eh? You know Chizuru-chan too?"

The world of Oni was just too small.

"You've met Chizuru-chan?"

"Uh-m, Kazama and Hakuouki were fighting,"

Ayame was referring to him as Hakuouki now, just like me.

"Hakuouki?"

"Um, Hijikata Toshizo. I almost forgot his name," Ayame giggled.

"Oh! So, is Chizuru-chan staying with him?"

Through the garden I saw a young geisha meeting with a customer in the shade of a persimmon tree.

"Uh-m, that's how it appears,"

I raised an eyebrow at their bold and intimate kiss. That could get a Gion geisha in trouble.

"Good for them! By the way, do you have any hair ornaments?"

"I do, I got them as an early birthday present,"

I turned my attention elsewhere and speculated what Osen would think about Ayame's tattoos. The jewels would always remind me of the tattoos on her legs.

Ayame dug through her bag again, producing the pins.

"Wow, beautiful! When's your birthday, how old are you turning?"

"Sixteen on August Seventeenth,"

"Are you excited? Who are you engaged to?"

"Eh? I'm not engaged. Is it a custom to be engaged so young around here?"

Most female Oni were just used to the concept of arranged marriages.

"My! You talk like you aren't in an Oni family. Could it be that you're like Chizuru-chan?"

"Hah? I guess. I grew up in a mountain temple,"

"That's quite amazing. So where are you going after you finish visiting Kyoto?"

"A place south of here, called Agano," Ayame innocently replied. I hadn't heard of Agano before now and I doubted Osen had.

"Agano!"

"You've heard of it?"

I was just as surprised as Ayame had sounded. How had Osen happened upon it? I supposed some people would have to know about it in order for them to make a profit as mercenaries.

"What are you going there for?"

"Kazama damaged his Douji-giri and the smithy in Agano can repair demon steel."

"Even so! Isn't that a little dangerous? I hear nothing but scary rumors about the place,"

"It's not that bad." Ayame defended. "I have . . . extended family in Agano,"

Osen was quiet for a few seconds. "You're a really unusual person, Ayame-chan,"

"I'll take that as a compliment," she snickered.

"Okay, Kazama, you can come back in," Osen called begrudgingly.

I entered, appreciating Ayame's neat appearance. She looked like she was from the same background as Osen for once.

The kimono fit snugger than her usual wear, prominently displaying her thinness. Chizuru might have had a fuller figure than her, in some regards.

"How long are you going out for?"

"My, are you jealous that I get to escort such a pretty girl around Kyoto?" Osen teased. Ayame's cheeks burned slightly; she at least understood an obvious compliment.

I scoffed at them. "I won't ask for your meal to be prepared,"

"That's fine," Osen retorted haughtily, "I plan on showing Ayame-chan the best manju stand in all of Kyoto,"

Ayame's eyes lit up and Osen grabbed her hand.

"Bye-bye!" she cheered and dragged Ayame away. She tried to wave to me without losing her balance.

I lay down again, absently rubbing the scar on my chest. Women were too energetic.

* * *

><p>The sun was just dipping beyond the horizon when they returned. I hadn't expected them to stay out quite so long.<p>

"Ayame-chan, why don't you stay at my place?"

"Sorry, Osen-chan, I can't since I'm paying for the bill."

I noticed their hair was wet. Ayame's hair was drawn back in a tight bun, even her bangs pinned back.

"Kazama, I bought you a meat bun on the way back," she tossed the bun at me, still wrapped in rice paper and warm to the touch.

I tore the paper off and took a bite, praying that she hadn't gotten a strange flavor. It was fine, oddly enough.

"Anyways," Osen deliberated. "I have to go now; maybe I'll see you sometime again, Ayame-chan!"

Osen trotted happily down the hall with Ayame leaning out, watching her go.

"We'll be leaving around noon," she called after her, Osen acknowledging with a shout back.

She closed the door and promptly removed the wooden rods, massaging her scalp. The kushi comb came next and she scratched her hairline. "Osen is brutal when she pins up wet hair," she complained.

"What did she think of your tattoos?" I inquired.

"She thought they were amazing, though she still scolded me." She appeared conflicted. I wondered what Osen had said to her.

"So, what did you do all day?"

"Hmm . . . we went to a couple temples, lots of food vendors, saw the big castle, tried soba, I bought a fan, then we watched a dance, listened to street performers, and ate manju on the way back."

Food seemed to be the highlight of her day.

I stood and motioned for her to follow. "Have you seen fireworks before?"

Ayame pursed her lips. "No, what are they?"

I shook my head. She hadn't even heard of fireworks? I figured even the North had festivals with fireworks but maybe not. Maybe she just hadn't stayed long enough to see them. "They're like giant flowers," I tried, "except they're made from fire. They make a loud pop when they go off,"

She crossed her arms, trying her hardest to picture it in her head. There wasn't enough to go by and she gave up with a shrug.

We left the inn and followed a stream of people down a road to a raised wooden stage. The drums were beating loudly and steadily and the flutes were whistling serenely.

We were at the back of the crowd, watching a play. The words were drowned out thanks to the people and the drums. Ayame balanced on her toes, trying to see it.

"I hate being short," she cursed.

"We're Oni," I remarked. "We're entitled to certain things," I offered her my hand and she warily took it.

I jumped, pulling her with me. The humans didn't even notice us as we landed on a roof top above them. I sat down without surrendering her small hand, obligating her to sit next to me.

The play was concluding and Ayame was entirely engrossed in the practiced movement of the performers. She either didn't realize or didn't care that I still held her hand.

Her palms were calloused. It took a lot of labor, or sword practice, to callous an Oni's hands for any length of time. Mine were mostly softened out again.

I noted the lamps and other lights being slowly blown out. The fireworks would soon start.

The performance ended and Ayame finally addressed her imprisoned hand. The torches by the stage were doused and I watched the sky. A backing of clouds obscured the moon and stars.

A high pitched whistle broke through the chattering of the audience. Ayame straightened, throwing her gaze about, trying to locate the source. Her priority was once again off me and I half smirked.

The tip of the thin trail of smoke leading high overhead exploded, golden light illuminating the streets for a couple seconds. Three more went off in quick succession.

Her amber eyes reflected the firelight brilliantly, her pout-prone lips smiling widely.

"Tamaya!"

She didn't stop appreciating the fireworks to ask what it meant and instead joined in the chorusing. I didn't even reprimand her when she practically bawled in my ear.

I was partly disappointed that her reaction had been interrupted but it meant I got to hold her hand comfortably captive for a while

longer. I thought she seemed more vulnerable like this and less like a boyish brute.

It ended too soon and Ayame finally yanked her hand away. She patted it on her knee. Her palm had gotten sweaty.

The lamps were lit once again and people hurriedly began making their way back to homes and inns. The clouds were hovering and there was a cool and damp wind picking up.

She hopped down without my assistance and landed in an empty alleyway to avoid any suspicious human eyes. I trailed after her, thinking her cheeks must have been scarlet again. It was too bad there wasn't enough light to confirm.

"What did you think of the fireworks?"

"They were amazing," she responded.

"What? No elaborate praise?" I pestered.

"I don't know. They were simply gorgeous,"

I chuckled and caught up to her. She'd already missed a turn. Either her sense of direction really was off or she just wasn't paying attention. It could have been either.

I took a correctional turn and she followed without question.

"Thanks for taking me to see the fireworks,"

The first heavy droplets of cold rain began to fall, just the beginning of a summer storm.

"You're welcome,"

"Do you always watch the fireworks from a roof top in Gion?"

I laughed. "Sometimes. It's not like I go to Gion every year anyways."

"Really? Why not?"

"Kyoto, and all of Nippon, has been in a bit of a troublesome spot recently," I hoped she at least knew that much.

"Uh-m. Gion sure makes it seem like nothing is amiss,"

By now, the occasional pelting of precipitation had turned into a constant prickling and the moisture had seeped through to my shoulders.

The lingering pink scar tissue on my neck and protested the cold, dully aching. I was just glad Ayame hadn't noticed it and questioned what it was from. It would probably be gone by tomorrow morning.

We all but ran down the last stretch and ducked inside. I ran a hand through my dripping hair, combing some of the droplets out.

Ayame stifled a yawn. It didn't surprise me after all the running around she had done.

"I'm sleeping in tomorrow," she informed.

I scoffed. Only as long as I did.

* * *

><p>Please review!

**This chapter was kind of low key but whatever. **

**There's this guy at school who really likes me (and he doesn't hide it) and he's always trying to get my attention by prodding my shoulder or nudging my knee x.x I think it's gross but apparently most dudes think annoying the person they like with touchy-feely-ness is the sure way to make them fall for them. I think they just prefer to not outright say their feelings XD why they gotta be so weird and girly? **

Anyways, sadly I won't have chapter nineteen ready for Wednesday. I probably won't have it ready for Friday either and Saturday would be cutting it close. I also don't want to miss another Wednesday update since it's the day I promise myself (and you guys) to post x.x so expect chapter nineteen next Wednesday :D

**I do have it started, so I'll tease you with the title :D
**

**Chapter 19: The crossed out village. **

19. The crossed out village

Please review!

Thanks to Mochi for reviewing again! I'm glad you're still reading and enjoying my story. It makes me feel just a bit of pride when someone says they're eagerly waiting for the next chapter =w= it's too bad you don't have mochi where you live D: I can only eat it when I visit the city DX

Thanks to EverRose808 for reviewing and adding me to your favorites :D I'm glad you like my story! I don't think I'll do any crossovers since they don't get as much attention and feel a bit awkward to me x.x besides that, I'd only ever do a Rin and Sesshomaru pairing for Inuyasha. I was thinking of doing an OC with Koga but decided against it since the anime ends with him marrying some random chick who wasn't even in the manga e.e I've also thought of InuTaisho and Izayoi plots since there isn't really solid information about the two, which allows for a lot of freedom when writing :D but, I don't like the Inuyasha community since there are some really hardcore people there x.x I also think the best Hakuouki crossovers would be with Rurouni Kenshin.

Thanks to Whimsicott for reviewing, I'm glad you liked the hand holding xD thanks for adding my story to your favorites and alerts!

****Thanks to desirae668 XD Ayame tries to be all serious but she can't help it when she's experiencing something new. You're such a patient person! I'm glad you're not put down or irritated by the messed up schedule =w=****

****Thanks to silentxangel for your much appreciated review! I'm glad someone commented on the afterword XD he's very forward and seems to forget every time I tell him not to touch me x.x I'm soon going to haul back and sock him one xwx the very thought is too bold for me xP I'm very glad you enjoyed the last chapter and their modest interaction :D it is a bit strange that Ayame doesn't know simple pleasures but knows about the war. My argument is that the war was on her doorstep! ;D I'm so jealous about you getting the Hakuouki game! My only gaming console is my computer T.T I grinned like a total idiot while I read the last part XD****

*** * ***

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 19: The crossed out village.

I said I was sleeping in yet I found myself up before him.

I kept absolutely still and breathed as normally as possible. I tried going back to sleep too, but it was no use.

It seemed like every time I was close to sleep he shifted on the other side of the screen or exhaled a loose breath. He didn't snore, which was nice.

Actually, if he snored I would have used it as an excuse to wake him up, but he didn't and I'd feel guilty if I woke him up for nothing.

I doubted he would complain. He wasn't a morning person either but rather someone who liked to be ready quickly. The moment he woke up he'd be nagging me to get ready so we could leave and be on our way.

Yeah, I was bored, but I also wanted to enjoy doing nothing for just a while longer. My visit to Agano would mostly be business and more somber affairs.

I felt tears welling in my eyes and pushed the thoughts of Oji-san away.

Of course, it didn't help that I immediately thought about Nee-san and the mountain instead. Why hadn't she come to see me off? She made me so angry sometimes. The sorrowful tears became tears of frustration.

I wanted to punch something but stopped myself. I was trying not to disturb Kazama.

After a moment of listening to his steady breathing I calmed myself down. Thoughts of the night before began filling my head and I buried my face to hide a nervous sigh.

Why did I remember the feeling of his grip on my hand so well?

Shouldn't I have remembered the spectacular fireworks exploding and the sensation of the powerful vibrations in my chest? I could even describe the fireworks better but the memory was like an imprint on my hand, a warm and comfortable touch that lingered long after it left.

I wondered if he'd forgotten to let go, or even if he thought me clumsy enough to slide off the sloped roof. I wasn't clumsy and there was no past experiences that should have made him think that. I had bumped my head on the boat but that was hardly my fault.

More than that, it just hadn't felt like it was unintentional. It distinctly felt like he was trying to keep my hand in his.

Halfway through the fireworks display he'd even meshed our fingers together like puzzle pieces that clearly didn't fit. I shouted 'Tamaya!' as loudly as I could and he still didn't let go. I'd forgotten to ask him what it meant afterwards too.

My palms felt sweaty all over again. He was probably just teasing me. I thought his methods might have changed a bit recently but suspected it was just my mind playing tricks on me.

I was really mad at the Beni-hime. Every time I thought back to that incident to try and make sense of it I found myself questioning my feelings for Kazama instead. I shouldn't have seen him as anything more than a friend and up until yesterday I couldn't even fathom any other type of relationship.

Then Kimigiku and Osen started throwing around words like 'betrothed' and 'engaged' and that bastard called me a child again. Great to know at least one of us hadn't changed.

His levelheaded judgment made me so jealous. He had such strong conviction and confidence in himself. I argued that it must have come with age since everyone else seemed to have it.

I was the youngest person I knew. Even Kouta was older, though he didn't exactly act it and usually treated me like his elder. I still couldn't figure out why he had acted so strangely that day I tricked Kazama into eating the pickled onigiri.

My emotions had run a full loop around me and I groaned. I didn't know what to think anymore.

I concluded without much more contemplation that it was impossible for Kazama to like me. Like, like, me. He was too proud and probably thought someone like me was unnatural.

The Beni-hime was such an unhelpful presence. I wondered if it was possible for me to be just a regular girl. Would Kazama like me if I was?

I put my hand on my father's swords for reassurance. Even without the Hime, I was still a warrior at heart. I doubted I'd be able to put down the sword, even for Kazama.

* * *

><p>Kazama woke up a while later and the trains of thoughts were

finally put to rest. I was silently grateful; all that deep thinking was giving me a headache and making me feel more and more uncertain.<p>

He hadn't really changed, even though his teasing last night had been unusual. That further supported my theory that it hadn't been meaningful or anything.

We got ready extra quickly and ate one last meal at the inn before paying the inn keeper and setting out for Agano.

I was glad that Kazama was leading the way. All the mountains and trees looked the same to me.

Like that, the scenery blended together and time passed quickly. He had estimated Agano was just a few hours away.

There was no conversation. Anything we could have said would have been left behind due to the tremendous speed we were moving at.

But, I knew we were there when the bland surroundings turned strikingly nostalgic. I stopped to appreciate it from a far and he skidded to a halt, curiously looking back at me.

Directly in front of us was a split mountain face with a river like a bleeding scar running from it. On either side were the houses and fields of Agano and Agano West. The forges were billowing smoke, the image of productivity.

Gorou-oji-san's hair seemed to weigh my pack down and I took a steadying breath.

"How many years has it been since you last set eyes on this quaint village?" Kazama asked.

"Nine," I responded distantly.

"Has it changed since then?"

"Not really," I laughed. "The only things I really remember are the bridge and the forge and, of course, the handsome mountain face."

He scoffed. "Handsome?"

"Uh-m," I took a step forward and berated myself for having weak legs again. "Let's walk,"

He thumped me lightly on the back and I let a miffed cry escape.

"Sentimentality doesn't suit you,"

Sometimes he was just so inconsiderate.

I skipped ahead and cheekily waved for him to hurry up. In just a couple more minutes we were in Agano.

A few kids looked up from their spin tops but mostly decided to ignore us. One had fair hair like Kazama and eyes with sharp pupils, a sure sign of demon blood.

Agano's habit of taking in strays hadn't changed in the years that I had been gone. There were lots of new faces, all adopted into the diminishing families.

Here, whether you were demon or human or even a combination of the two, you had equal rights. That didn't mean there weren't biases and such.

The source of most the discontentment seemed to be between rivaling families. They used anything they could to nettle each other or place the blame when it was convenient for them.

Which is why I wasn't surprised to see two grown women arguing with a man, metal fans pointed in an aggravated fashion.

The man was holding a sasumata and I immediately recognized him as a member of the Yamamoto clan. They were a sort of village patrol and kept the peace when they could. It was hard when most everyone was armed in some way.

The women, who I realized had the exact same faces, were complaining to him. He nodded, completely uninterested in whatever they had to say.

"I'm telling you! That Nakamura brat cut up my laundry this morning, right, Tsukiko?"

"I am knowledgeable of that type of slanted cut, Yamamoto-sama,"

Kazama arched a perplexed brow. She called him with a respective title but still pointed a war fan at him. She didn't even look at him as she did, rather watched the clouds roll by.

"Yes, yes, you've been telling me the same thing for a quarter of an hour now. I'll go ask him about it and let his father punish him in his own time.

The one whose name I hadn't discerned stomped her foot and rudely gestured at the poor man. He shook his head and left without another word.

Tsukiko turned and caught sight of us. We were both watching the exchange with a sort of skeptical expression.

"Look, Ameko, it is a familiar little flower."

The tantrum throwing twin looked back (they couldn't be anything but twins) and slapped her fan in her cupped hand rhythmically. They must have been from the Tsubaki family. They all learned tessenjutsu, fan techniques, over sword styles.

The women approached us with measured steps, which was kind of unsettling when they both wore the same purse-lipped frown.

"Hey, Tsukiko, remember that bet?"

"I do not know what you are talking about," Tsukiko retorted. She clearly did.

Ameko shoved her sister away, sending her tumbling. She bowed deeply to me.

"Um," I tried but got cut off anyways.

"Welcome back to Agano, little flower. My sister had bet against your return and now she owes me five gold coins,"

That was probably the oddest greeting I had ever received and I bowed back reluctantly. Nice to know my return was worth money.

Tsukiko had picked herself up off the ground and was beating dust off her red haori. Bells sewn to the sleeves jingled musically.

"I should have instead bet on your return with a man," she grumbled.

I spied Kazama grinning from the corner of my eye and couldn't even manage an exasperated explanation. What was with people and marriage? I felt like asking them where their husbands were just to be spiteful but stopped myself. The answer might have been dead.

"Oh please, Tsukiko. Anyone can see that he's clearly a single man,"

I briefly wondered how she knew but was too busy being blown away as she fit her fan under his chin. It was beginning to seem like the fans were extensions of their pointing fingers.

"Refrain from touching me," he advised, his voice as crisp as an autumn wind. He pushed the fan away with the back of his hand and an annoyed glare in his eyes.

Served him right for watching loftily.

Ameko huffed. "What a cold man; you can have him, Ayame,"

I disregarded what she said. "How exactly do you know me?" it had been eating at me for a while. They seemed to know me well.

Ameko pretended to be hurt but Tsukiko answered seriously. "We babysat you and your sister while your mother and your father were busy."

"It's not surprising that you don't remember us," Ameko conceded, sweeping her straight black hair over her shoulder.

"What are you here for?" Tsukiko asked. She noted the two swords on my side and nodded in understanding. "They visited you?"

"Uh-m. How's Ichirou-jiji?"

"He's still healthy," both twins made the same face. The oldest Agano wasn't exactly loved by many. He had the appearance of a senile old man when I last lived here. I couldn't imagine him now.

"We will walk you to that empty old house if you still cannot remember the way," Tsukiko offered.

Ameko cackled. "Do you still get lost crossing the road?"

Kazama's scowl pointed upwards and I bristled.

"I was never that bad," I defended, a blush creeping up my neck.

Tsukiko shrugged and led the way down a dusty path.

Agano was small but quite rich looking. Ten large homes populated the village with smaller ones all around. Sadly, the castle-like residences were mostly abandoned as the newer heads moved into their own homes of more practical proportions.

We turned down a path overgrown with weeds. An elegant courtyard fenced in with stone walls and waste high hedges surrounded a long and majestic mansion.

It was hard to imagine a single old man was up keeping it.

"We'll leave you here," Ameko grunted. "That old man creeps me out,"

"Bye, for now, Ayame," Tsukiko tonelessly added.

They departed back up the path and I hesitantly put my hand on the swinging gate.

The bush rustled and a person with grey, straw like, hair popped up. I jumped back, bumping into Kazama's chest.

He leaned on the fence, gnarled hands stained with dirt and gripping blades of grass and yellow dandy lion heads.

He gave me a toothless smile. "Still a bean sprout, eh?"

I glowered at him. "Jiji," I greeted. I'd been happy to see him for about ten seconds before I faintly recalled his eccentric habits. "How's your health?"

He straightened up. Ichi-jij wasn't even a half shaku taller than me.

"Come in, I'll brew some tea for you. You have a lot to share, I'm sure."

* * *

><p>We sat in the main room, awkwardly quiet. Kazama was subtly gazing about. He wouldn't admit it, but he was just a little bit impressed.<p>

We faced a tapestry of a young man wielding a katana against a tiger in a torrent of muddy water. His eyes were a piercing blue. He was the founder, Agano Ryuji.

"So, this is where you were born." Kazama commented rhetorically.

"Uh-m."

The faint light filtering in from the open doors was comforting. The garden outside was blooming with Chrysanthemums already and their spicy scent wafted in. Other foliage bloomed wildly as well.

I stood and inspected the inscription on the tapestry. I hadn't been able to understand it back then. I read aloud, "Honor thy enemy and honor thyself. Respect life and death as thou respect beast and nature."

Jiji entered with our tea and even had sasa mochi for us too.

"Jiji, I don't get the tapestry here. It says to respect life and death as one respects nature but he doesn't look like he does either,"

After setting the tray down in front of Kazama he stood next to me, staring at the picture with one squinted eye. Suddenly, he rapped the back of my head with his boney knuckles.

I opposed with a firm hand and he pinched the tight skin across the top of my hand, leaving a red mark.

"Dummy, you think the elderly have all the answers?"

Kazama was grinning again when I glanced back at him but he still didn't say anything. That was beginning to irritate me.

I plopped down on my zabuton and stole one of his sasa mochi.

"Before my patience runs out, would you introduce your companion?"

"Kazama Chikage of the Western Oni," he introduced himself. I think he might have enjoyed my uncle's bizarre attitude.

Jiji appraised Kazama with his dark eyes for a split second. "I don't like Oni,"

Kazama wasn't offended in the least. "What about your niece and her deceased mother?" he challenged.

Ichirou waved a dismissive hand. "They're family. It don't matter,"

I felt my heart warm slightly to old man. He said some great things.

"They're still Oni," Kazama argued and I felt like elbowing him when his lips turned ever so slightly up.

Jiji paced for a moment. He came close to Kazama and he craned his neck to watch the geezer's quick hand.

"True," he paused and Kazama let his guard down. "But it still don't matter," and he swatted him in the back of the head.

I giggled and Kazama shot me a peeved look, combing his disarrayed hair back into order with his fingers.

The old guy sat in front of us, knees clicking. He swiped one of Kazama's mochi and bit it with his gums and what was left of a few molars.

He seemed indifferent to the theft and I wondered if he didn't like sweet things either.

"So," Ichi-jiji began, "I'm the last of my generation?"

The atmosphere plummeted and I felt a tight knot growing in my throat.

I gently pulled my travel pack apart and rifled through it for Oji-san's hair. If anyone should have it, it was Ichirou. He was the head of the Agano household and his eldest brother. I handed over the rectangular box.

He opened it and glanced dolefully at the folded hair. "Welcome home,"

Jiji closed it up again and laid it at his side.

"I always thought I'd be the last, unlucky, brother." His old eyes watched me for a long moment. "You understand more about yourself now?"

"Yes," I admitted. A lot of the trivial parts hadn't sunk in yet, but the main points had hit home. If I belonged anywhere it was definitely here and I felt that if I could change my past I should also change theirs.

"You should understand then, that those swords don't belong on your hip and neither do you have the power to restrain them."

A discontented growl rumbled lowly from Kazama's chest, so quietly that I doubted Jiji heard it.

"No one does."

Jiji nodded. "Precisely. It rarely happens, but your father succeeded in creating a sword so malicious that its demonic energy is enough to devour flesh beings. It's a sword that won't hesitate to turn its fangs on its master. Abandon it,"

"I can't,"

He startled. "What? Why not?"

I nibbled my lip lightly. "I can't really say; I just feel like there's something I can accomplish with it."

Jiji sighed. He probably remembered that I had been particularly stubborn as a child. "Just don't get yourself mauled to death," like your parents.

I bowed deeply to him, "There's still one more matter I have to attend to at the smithy,"

"Eh? What do you need to talk to that stout pup about?"

"Kazama's demon blade is damaged," I paused. "Does the old man no longer run the forge?"

"He died last fall," Jiji replied.

"I see," he was old, maybe even older than Jiji.

"His great-granddaughter is working as the head smithy right now." Jiji mentioned. "She's young but knows what she's doing. Some are calling her a genius sword smith,"

Kazama was looking a bit on the pale side, holding the Douji-giri possessively. I figured he was dissatisfied with the smithy being both young and female.

"I always thought if you stayed you would have joined the Yamaguchi and become a smithy yourself," Jiji mused. "It was certainly the only place you knew how to get to. Probably because of the smoke."

* * *

><p>It really wasn't that hard to get to the smithy. You just had to follow the dividing river up to the smoke trail coming from the mountain.<p>

"So, you spent a lot of time up here?" Kazama remarked as we walked up the steep incline.

"Uh-m,"

"Why? Aren't forges stuffy and generally uncomfortable?"

"A little, but the process of making swords and other tools is really fascinating." That said; I still preferred wielding a sword over forging one. It was too long and tediously boring for me.

The door to the forge was open and a sultry breeze did indeed come from it.

"Excuse me," I called. The only response was the steady beating of metal.

I stepped into the threshold, glad I left Kyoto in a yukata and not a kimono. I followed the exposed ground down a hallway that led into the work room. I could hear the fire crackling angrily.

"Nakamura Akio, I swear, if you don't get out of my forge I'll beat your ass myself." Her voice was hoarse and she sounded angry enough to carry out her threat.

"Ano, sorry to intrude,"

She looked up from the chain sickle she was hammering on. Her eyes were narrow from constantly looking at glowing metal and she had the beginning of crow's feet wrinkles. She wasn't so much stout as she was brawny.

"Sorry, the little brat's been back and forth since those nasty twins broke his precious kusarigama. He's lucky that's all they broke for

tearing up their laundry,"

Kazama chuckled. We were both wondering if they'd broken it before or after their complaint fell on deaf ears.

She hammered the pliable pieces back together, trying not to ruin the shape.

"So, what are you strangers here for? I can put this piece of junk aside if you've got a good job for me,"

"A repair that can be done only here, apparently," Kazama retorted.

"Demon steel? A blade from here or somewhere else? What's its name?"

"The Douji-giri Yasutsuna," I supplied.

She swept the kusarigama into a basin of cold water without another thought and signaled for Kazama to hand the sword over.

He did so, begrudgingly.

She unsheathed it with a flourish, chucking the scabbard back at Kazama.

"By the gods, what type of monster did you try to slay? The blade is hacked apart,"

I tried not to laugh. "How long will the repairs take?"

She wiped some sweat from her brow, leaving a black, sooty, mark. "The jewel steel is completely worn out and I won't have a new stock in until September. I'll have to separate the demon steel until then, since the damaged tamahagane will wear the energy away. I'd say I'll have it complete during the winter,"

"It'll have to be remade then?" Kazama asked.

"Yup, just look at this," she placed her hand against the sharp part of the blade and I expected blood to start running down the blade. She pulled her hand away unscathed and a piece of the blade even chipped away. "It's completely blunt."

She picked up a strange hammer with a bell attached and placed the Douji-giri on an anvil. She swung it down deftly and the blade broke apart. It seemed like Kazama shrank with each resounding clang and bell chime.

After ten minutes of pounding, the metal was amazingly reduced to a fine dust. She beat the hammer against the anvil and grey, ash-like, particles jumped from the pile. It seemed like the bell was calling it forward.

"Hah? So that's the true form of the demon blade?"

"Yup. Usually it's white but the Douji-giri is combined with divine silver." She rung the bell five more times but nothing else came from the larger pile. "That's strange; I thought the Douji-giri would have

a higher quantity of demon steel."

Kazama took a step closer, appraising the pile.

The Yamaguchi smithy placed an urn next to the pile and rang the bell one last time. The demon steel jumped into the pot and she fit a cork in it. "It's quite lively, despite its age,"

I enjoyed his confused face.

She got a piece of rice paper and stuck it to the pot. "What's your name?"

"Kazama Chikage,"

She wrote it down with a stick of charcoal and pointed at me, "The price is as follows: buck Sakurano-sama off his high horse,"

Everyone here really liked scheming. "I won't be able to do it with my current power. I'll also need a new sword,"

She shrugged. "Not a problem,"

"Are there any alternative methods for making a demon blade?"

She caught my eye and knew exactly what I was hesitating for.

"You want to create a powerful sword that isn't outright evil?" she guessed.

Kazama swept a look over the two of us. He'd been staring at the container with the Douji-giri inside of it for a while.

"It's dangerous, but there's a cave on the coast north of here where the corpses of demons mysteriously appear. I don't know their circumstance or the quality of their souls but it's a promising idea."

"Thank you, Yamaguchi-san,"

"Not a problem. Just call me Kuri from now on,"

Kazama had been silently pondering and finally piped up. "You're talking about the Demon Bone Yard, aren't you?" he didn't sound too enthusiastic.

"You've heard of it?" Kuri returned.

"My home is inland of it."

* * *

><p>We went back to Jiji's after that. I wanted to spend the night here and use the afternoon to reacquaint myself with the village. Kazama was still recovering from having his sword cruelly crushed apart right in front of his eyes.<p>

"Come here, before you go off stirring up trouble," Jiji instructed.

We both followed him into a dim room. There was another tapestry with Agano Ryuji and beneath it seemed to be a family tree of sorts.

At the very top was Agano Ryuji's name, faded. The date was from more than three hundred years ago. A long list of names followed, all with deceased written next to them. I found Agano Ichirou and his brothers near the very bottom. Deceased was freshly painted next to Gorou.

I tried not to become glassy eyed and gazed at my parents' names instead. Two blank tabs were underneath theirs.

Jiji put his hand on one and faced me, a serious glimmer in his eyes.

"You've been away from us for a long time; you should look upon us in a different light. It's your decision now, to take up the Agano name. Will you?"

There was no question about it.

"I will."

"Welcome back, my niece."

The tablet was flipped. _Agano Ayame._

* * *

><p>Wow, I had a lot of reviews for the last chapter! Must have been the Valentine's Day love XD I'll try to keep it shorter and sweeter next time but I can't help but want to respond to all your gorgeous reviews!~

As a side note, I was reading wenyigo's profile because I was procrastinating and learned that Hanashobu is one of her top five favorite fanfictions. Thank you so much! I was reading your page because I'm currently forbidding myself from reading fanfics xD yours seem interesting so I'll read them after I finish mine! I'm afraid if I distract myself anymore I'll lose interest in this fanfic T~T but I doubt that'll happen since I have so many dedicated readers! :D I love you guys!

Chapter 20: Sea cave, Demon Bone Yard.

20. Sea cave, Demon Bone Yard

Please review!

My hits and visitors are at an all time low T.T

**Thanks to silentxangel, I'm glad I've satisfied you again! Ayame-chan is just a tad (very) stun XD Kouta is the younger fox sibling who Ayame kind of picks on and was being secretive during the Tengu's visit. His older brother, Hayate, is the one who was being flirty and asked for Ayame's forgiveness during the tenth chapter. A chapter or so later Ayame reveals to Kazama that Hayate cut her hair once. As for my new characters, I'm glad they were fulfilling and entertaining! I wanted to include Kuri-chan just a bit more but I'll

have a some of time for that later XD also, the family tree is just a record of who is (was for the most part) part of the family. Ayame and her sister were turned over because it was uncertain if they'd ever be back. Hinata probably never will XD I want a PSP now x.x reading your review is the highlight of my week :D**

AngeloftheShining, my dear new reviewer! Thank you for the review :D I'm glad all my characters are uniquely appealing to you and the story itself is enticing! I'm flattered that you even added me to your favorite authors list o/o!

Thanks for reviewing again, Whimsicott! I'm glad you found the sword scene funny XD every time someone reviews and says they can't wait for the next chapter it brings tears of happiness to my eyes Q.Q almost XD

Did anyone else notice how often I said glad XD?

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 20: Sea cave, Demon Bone Yard.

The Agano estate was peaceful, or lonely. The whole village had that kind of feeling.

I hadn't seen much of Ayame since yesterday afternoon. I could have trailed after her and met a few interesting people but decided against it.

Instead, I appreciated the garden from the decking outside of my room.

It was midday again and I was starting to get bored. Doing nothing made me particularly restless.

I found myself wandering aimlessly through the village, earning a few stares. Mostly from young women.

"Nameless one,"

I looked over my shoulder at the twin from the day before. It was the distant one that wore reverse miko robes. Her long black hair was pinned back.

"Are you looking for the little flower?"

I smirked. "I am," it was amusing how the people here viewed Ayame.

"She went over to the Western village yesterday evening and again this morning. I assume she is with Hashimoto-sama's wife,"

I peered across the river. There were fewer homes on the Western side.

"It is the large home with the hideous red roof tiles,"

"Right,"

Tsukiko had a sharp but calm tongue, unlike her sister who lashed out in any direction without thought.

I'd seen the bridge across the swift flowing river earlier and headed to it. The looming mountain cast a shadow over the settlement.

The place Tsukiko had pointed out was close to the river bank and just a few steps from the bridge.

I stopped at the entrance, wondering if I should just walk in.

A young boy came to the gate, looking up at me with his finger hooked in his lip. A small dog ran circles around his legs, yipping excitedly.

"Has an older sister come by?" I asked.

"Uh-n, Ka-chan's guest," he pushed the swinging door open to let me in without another word and clumsily ran to the house, hardly waiting for me.

The dog relayed back and forth between our heels, following us down the hall.

"Ka-chan!" he called at a sliding door with colorfully decorated washi paper. "Another guest,"

"Ka-chan's busy. Go get Ba-chan to make them tea," his mother responded in a removed voice.

He ignored her and went in anyways. I hovered in the doorway for a moment, awkwardly staring.

I could think of one person and one person only who had a complexion almost as naturally pale as a geisha's makeup. I was staring at her bare back, trying to make sense of the lines and patchy colors across her shoulders, before I realized what I was doing.

I stepped away from the door and leaned against the wall, staring out at the pond in the yard. She had small shoulders.

"Another tattoo?" I chided incredulously.

"Kazama? You pervert!"

There was scrabbling and I assumed she was making sure I wasn't peeking while grabbing something to cover herself.

"Stop moving, he isn't looking anymore,"

Ayame cursed but stopped fussing.

"Kenta, what did Ka-chan tell you about coming in without knocking?"

"Not to," he answered.

She chortled. "Go keep the peeper company,"

I didn't blush or anything silly like that. I didn't regret accidentally peeping either. I hadn't seen much anyways.

It kind of irritated me that the little guy ignored her request and stayed in there though.

"You're ruining your skin," I commented.

I didn't expect the boy's mother to reply instead.

"Quit being so noisy, complain when you're the one who shares her bed,"

"Satomi-san!" Ayame scolded. Her face was probably apple red.

"Hold still, I'll make your tattoo cry," Hashimoto Satomi threatened. I wondered what Ayame thought of that name.

"Kazama," she started, voice trembling from restrained rage. "Get out,"

I chuckled. "I was going to wait and get one myself," not a chance.

"Really?" Satomi sounded hopeful at the prospect of drawing on someone else's skin. "It's a bit challenging when you Oni heal so fast but it makes it so much quicker,"

A shiver ran down my spine. Why anyone would prick themselves over and over again was beyond me, not to mention with ink.

"He's just teasing you, Satomi-san. He's actually a wimp,"

"Kazama-san, don't be such a ninny. Ayame-chan is lying still like a good little girl, not even flinching,"

"Ita-ta-ta," Ayame exaggerated. "It stings so badly, I must be dying,"

"I haven't had a new tattoo in such a long time, want to give me one when I finish?"

I scrunched my nose up and slithered away. I decided it was time for me to leave when they started talking about tattooing as though they were dressing each other up.

* * *

><p>Her uncle accused me of sulking when I went back to the Agano household and that somehow led to me watering the plants in the garden. I took my time, loathing to be put to work on something else.<p>

I finished and borrowed the bath. There seemed to be a vein of hot water under much of Agano and the bath was filled with water pumped from the ground.

The scar on my chest was just a white star now and the mark on my neck from the Beni-hime was completely gone.

I was surprised when Ayame hadn't noticed it at all. Then again, Ayame's gaze hardly wandered from my mine. That was part of her straightforward charm.

I was out by the time Ayame got back and the old man scoffed at the both of us.

"Young people," he lamented. "Taking baths in the middle of the day when there's work to be done,"

Her subtly green hued hair was indeed wet. What was wrong with taking a bath in the middle of the day? I thought it was a great way to pass time.

Ayame surprised us both when she suddenly hugged him.

"Ji-chan, sorry, but I've got another little chore to run. I don't exactly know when I'll be back but Kazama's sword is being held hostage so you don't have to worry too much."

He patted her back, "You're just like Rokurou, can't keep still for a whole day." He cleared his throat and held her out to arm's length. I swore his eyes were twinkling from moisture. "Stay out of trouble,"

* * *

><p>We had actually planned on camping in the woods that night if we couldn't make it to the sea cave by nightfall. There was a small teahouse and inn combined so we stayed there instead, enjoying chilled green tea with honey and a hot meal as the sun sank under the sea on the horizon.<p>

"You're going to be covered in tattoos and no one's going to want to marry you," I teased. I meant it to be that way, at least.

"Osen said the same thing," she grumbled. "What's the big deal?"

"It's unnatural," I realized the mistake as soon as I said it.

She hung her head, still gnawing on a fish bone. "It's not like it's anywhere noticeable,"

"It was pretty noticeable,"

"You pervert, I knew you were ogling," her energy seemed to be sapped and it sounded halfhearted.

"Why'd you even get the wretched thing if you were just going to feel bad about it afterwards?" I challenged.

"I felt awful when I got the ones on my legs; it just takes a couple days to get used to."

"Ho? Is that so?"

"Uh-m," she paused, flexibly touching the center of her back. "It's a really nice tattoo and the background is mostly empty like the ones on my legs. Nothing too heavy,"

Did I dare ask? "What's in the tattoo?"

She huffed. "I'm not telling you,"

"I saw red and gold amongst other colors," I admitted.

"You pervert, you really were shamelessly gawking!"

"Are there koi fish?"

"No."

I thought for sure it'd be koi fish. I couldn't see it being butterflies again. It was bugging me and it didn't sound like she was in the mood to disclose the form of her tattoo. She was probably too stubborn anyways.

"Tell me," I'd find out one way or another, eventually.

"No way, you pervert,"

I didn't really get what part of wanting to know what her stupid tattoo looked like made me a pervert.

I sighed, defeated, and set the dinner tray aside. We were sharing a room again and I rolled my futon out on one side of the screen. "Sleep with one eye open,"

"I'll murder you, pervert,"

* * *

><p>The sea cave, or Demon Bone Yard, was located on a rocky point surrounded by white shores. A number of ships had hit the sandy shoulders in the past and sank.<p>

As if that wasn't bad enough, the Demon Bone Yard also had the uncanny ability of drawing demons to their deaths.

That's why we were sitting in an itchy straw field overlooking the beach, waiting for the tide to go down.

"You're such a baby; we'd only have to walk through ankle deep water if we went now."

"I don't trust this place,"

"And that's why I called you a scaredy-cat," she murmured. "If we wait any longer we're just going to have to walk out in deeper water while carrying bones,"

I was sure we were about to commit some sort of sin. "Exactly how much do we need?"

She pondered that a moment. "The Imperial Chrysanthemum is literally made from the fragments of more than a thousand demons. It doesn't

even have tamahagane like the Douji-giri, which makes it physically stronger but a lot less stable, or something like that."

I scoffed at her, "Do you even know what you're talking?"

She blushed. "I went over to Kuri's again and she explained it to me, but it kind of went over my head,"

I rolled my eyes.

"All I know is that I want bones from at least ten different demons. Obviously, the more demons you use the more powerful the blade becomes. However, if I chose too many or types that conflict the demonic energy will become unstable."

I processed that for a moment. "So, that means the Imperial Chrysanthemum is imperfect?"

"No blade is perfect," she defended. "The Imperial Chrysanthemum is just the result from my father biting off more than he could chew."

I stood up, shaking grainy sand from my geta. I hated the ocean. "Let's just hope there isn't anything fresh down there,"

That seemed to faze her. "Uwah, I hope not,"

I stepped off the scratchy beach grass and slid down the loose bank. I'd have sand stuck between my toes for days thanks to this expedition.

"This feels so nice!"

I glared back at her. She already had her pale yellow and green patterned yukata bunched around her knees. She held her sandals in one hand and buried her feet completely in the hot sand.

"Don't waste time; it's too tiring to run in this terrain as it is,"

"Don't be so grumpy. This is actually kind of fun if you think about it,"

"What's there to think about?" I grumbled.

She ignored me and charged straight at the surf, kicking up clouds of dust.

I shook my head. She needed to get a grip on the situation.

Ayame stomped through the waves, not caring that her yukata was being drenched from the water she splashed.

"Don't go out too far," I warned, "there's a strong undertow here."

"Undertow?" she called back.

I followed from the shore, wondering if I'd have to jump in and rescue her before we even made it to the damned cave.

"The current will try to carry you out and under," I explained. "Even good swimmers avoid it when they can," I hoped she heeded my words.

Maybe she even found the thought frightening; she suddenly seemed to find the ocean less appealing and trudged back to shore.

"That was refreshing,"

A breeze picked up and sand blew down the beach, stinging my ankles. I wished I was wearing tabi socks but figured it'd be pointless when they'd just be soaked afterwards.

"That burns," she giggled, rubbing the grains sticking to her bare calves off.

"It wouldn't be so bad if you fixed your yukata," I remarked.

"It's not that bad,"

That wasn't the point I was trying to make but I guess it didn't matter. She'd do things her own way anyways.

"How are you going to decide which bones to take?" I finally asked. It'd been bothering me for a while.

"Bones that have residual youki," she answered simply.

"How exactly do you discern that?" I rebuked.

"It's the same way you can sort of guess a living demon's power,"

I snorted, "That's too vague,"

"I guess someone like you who couldn't even feel the Douji-giri's will wouldn't understand something like that," she returned.

"Forgive me for being spiritually insensitive," I retorted sarcastically.

"You're just jealous," she paused. "It's like when you notice someone coming even though they're being perfectly quiet. A presence, or something like that. You'll know when we get there,"

I ruffled her hair. She was just trying to sound smart. I'd forgotten she actually was quite educated. She could read and even practiced more complicated medical procedures.

Of course, she was still just a kid.

The sand was interrupted by smooth stones and the entrance to the cave was in sight.

The Demon Bone Yard was particularly infamous among demons that knew and feared the unexplainable power. Even humans avoided it, calling it haunted.

All the same, I wasn't particularly afraid, just weary. Being a demon

myself meant I couldn't take this type of thing lightly.

The tide licked around the rocks and I carefully stepped from one wet, slimy, rock to the next.

We passed under the lip and into the mouth, an unpleasant sea odor yawning out. Ayame pinched her nose and even I raised my sleeve to my face, trying to filter some of the stench out.

"Ugh, something is rotting,"

I looked into the deep darkness, spotting the source; a giant white snake with gouges lining its underside. "You don't say,"

"That's the biggest snake demon I've ever seen," Ayame narrated in a nasally voice. I would have laughed if we were anywhere but here.

"How long is this going to take?" I questioned.

"What, you had enough already?" she taunted.

"This place is disgusting," I growled back. I took a step forward and crunched a couple small bones. The floor was littered with fish bones.

"It doesn't look like we'll be here for long," she replied. "I'll just grab a dozen or so bones and then gladly leave,"

I wasn't the only one getting bad vibes then. I supposed this was the presence she was looking for. Too bad it seemed to be coming from everywhere.

Ayame crouched, rooting through a couple human shaped skeletons. The skulls had fangs so I could only assume they were some type of demon I hadn't encountered before.

"Hmm, I don't think I'll use these ones,"

I felt out of place and quietly appraised the bones across from her. "I found a dog with two tails,"

She scooted over and touched the foreleg, gently.

"Uh-m, his energy is pretty calm," she assessed.

I furrowed my eyebrows, feeling slightly irritated. I didn't understand how she could just read the 'energy' or whatever. We were both Oni, we both had about the same capabilities. I wasn't dull; I didn't often get caught off guard.

She broke the thumb sized canines off and moved on. She went through five more before pulling a long thigh bone from another humanoid demon. I couldn't imagine it being happy about that.

I swallowed an ounce of my pride. "How can you tell which ones are suitable?"

"Did I ever tell you that I'm more used to working on animals?"

Again with the irrelevant facts.

"No," and I was glad she hadn't. I would have been incredibly discomfited by the knowledge.

"When I deal with something that lives completely on instinct I have to look for body language to understand what it thinks and what it wants." She swept her hand over the spine of some type of deer. "But, that's not all. Animals have a strong and unpolluted presence when they aren't hiding it. It's easy to tell what they want,"

"Are you saying these bones are no more than simple beasts?"

"Partly. They can no longer move or speak so they can only project their feelings. Furthermore, their feelings are simpler now that they're dead." She patted her sword. "The Imperial Chrysanthemum is mostly a sleeping sword so I didn't understand the feelings of the many demons until it was stirred awake by the state of my own soul. They reacted to my fear and it amplified their own. They didn't want to feel hunted so they lent me a hand,"

That still didn't enlighten me. Maybe it was something you had to be gifted with.

"What about the Douji-giri's feelings?" she had made a dig about the will of that sword before.

"I'm not completely sure, but it felt like the Douji-giri had a vendetta of sorts," she passed a handful of bones off to me, some long enough to be used as clubs.

"I feel like a grave robber," I complained.

"I do too, but they're not that angry after being moved so I guess it's alright,"

Not _that _angry, huh?

"Don't you have enough yet?"

She pouted. "But I've got a nice combination going,"

I couldn't believe she was so at ease with this. This was surely worse than murder in some ways.

She had a stack of bones herself and a large claw tucked into her sash. She surveyed her work with a critical eye. "I guess this is okay,"

I was relieved it hadn't taken any longer; I could hear the swelling tide lapping at the stones outside the cave again.

She kept pace with my long strides and followed my example as I jumped over the frothy, white, sea foam. The very tops of the rocks were dry and free of slippery aquatic plants.

The path back to the beach was still uncovered and she leapt down onto it, preferring the more reliable footing. She crushed a few

snail shells under her wooden geta.

"So, where are we going after this?"

"Why are you asking me?" she was the one making all the decisions.

She drew her shoulders in, a sigh rising in her chest. "Well, I don't have anywhere I need to be right now. It's either back to Agano or Nee-san's for awhile,"

"Where else could you be?" I inquired.

"I don't know! That's why I asked you," she was frustrated with my disinterest.

"You're implying that I should go home and you'd like to tag along, aren't you?"

She kicked a wave, trotting through the water once again. "Can I?"

"I'm not going back,"

"Hah? Why?" she whined.

"Amagiri should have already told them that I'm alive and well. I see no reason in showing myself,"

"Don't you think you should still go meet with them?" she reasoned.

I chuckled. "Aren't you just being curious about my home?" I felt like scolding her for telling me to do something she had done nine years late.

"Well, we are nearâ€"!" she cut her words short with a startled cry as she fell face first into the wet sand.

A second later and I would have been cackling at her fortune; instead I was beating my way through the water, chasing after her as she was dragged away. A thick and oily black tentacle had wrapped around her ankle and tugged her under the surf before she had a chance to take a deep breath, or even let go of her spoils.

There was no telling how far she had already been taken and I quelled the lump in my throat with a deep breath as I dived into the salty water. It was murky and faintly stung my eyes but I paddled through the water as fast as I could, shrugging out of my over coat as I did.

I broke the surface and quickly refilled my lungs with air before submerging again. There was a glint in through the hazy water and I followed it, swimming through what could only be a cloud of blood. I felt heavy and cold but pursued the red tinted light.

It was sinking fast and I forced my arms and legs to move faster.

I was close enough to see that the glow was sword shaped and the reflection of a pale face, eyes pinched shut, air bubbles escaping

from nose.

Whatever had attacked her was gone, leaving a trail of blood. I was amazed that she'd been able to fend it off underwater, while still holding onto her bones with one arm.

My attention was drawn to the pulsating light being emitted from the Imperial Chrysanthemum. I grabbed onto her arm, carefully pulling her to my chest while avoiding the blade. I tried to swim back to the surface but the current was harder to fight against while holding onto her.

I shook her arm, silently instructing her to let go of the bones. Her eyes opened just a crescent and she glared at me despite the situation, golden embers ignited.

We were both running out of air and I was beginning to feel lightheaded and my eardrums had an unpleasant pressure about them. I felt my demonic instincts awakening and accepted the change.

An eternity later we broke the surface and sputtered for air, hacking coughs filling the summer afternoon. A couple seagulls squawked at us, ditching their rocks on the shore thirty feet away.

I squinted against the bright onslaught by the sun and began making my way towards land. The deadweight at my side clung to me, still choking on seawater.

"You okay?"

Ayame cleared her throat. "Yeah," she managed hoarsely.

We reached the beach and she dropped the bones in the sand, kneeling while taking her swords from her obi to shake them free of water.

"Where'd you put the bones I entrusted you with?"

I sighed. She didn't have to be so serious.

They were still on the path to the sea cave, caught between two stones as the tide began to ebb away at them. I hadn't even noticed it when I discarded them.

I pushed the transformation back, the charged energy flowing away. It hadn't been useful for something like this before now.

I retrieved the bones so she wouldn't complain again and set them down in the pile.

Her hair was half down, spreading down her back. The collar of her yukata was opened across her shoulders and goose bumps had appeared. She fixed it, the wet material clinging to her white skin.

"Good thing you left your travel pack in the field," if not we'd both have been stuck in uncomfortable clothes for a couple hours.

"Thanks for saving me,"

I had thought the gooseflesh might have been from the cold but

understood now that nearly drowning had terrified her more than she let on.

I patted her back and pretended to give an exasperated puff.

"I guess we'll have to stop by my family home now,"

* * *

><p>Please review!

****Chapter 21: Kazama Oni.****

****Who wants to meet Kazama Emi-chan?****

21. Author's Note

****Author's Note****

* * *

><p>Don't read if you hate them as much as I do.

****I'll be short and try not to sound like I'm making excuses, which is exactly what I'm about to do.****

****So, I bought a new game and got bored with it a couple days ago and realized suddenly I didn't have chapter twenty-one started. I knew what I wanted to write, I just felt a bit lost thanks to a really distracting game. ****

****Therefore, as you might have guessed, no Wednesday update this week. ****

****I'm really sorry since I promised an update but I can't make it no matter what. I plan to commit myself to my writing for the next week and have two chapters for March 14****th****, Hanashobu's anniversary.****

****I know most of you are pretty tolerant and even used to people here not keeping promises but I'll try and see to it that this is the last time I post an annoying author's note. ****

****Anyways, review and tell me if you want the author's note removed and I'll remove it when I post twenty-one and twenty-two next week.****

* * *

><p>For next week:

****Chapter 21: Kazama Oni****

****Chapter 22: Training, convincing, and scolding. ****

****Also, a little forecast, Hanashobu is going to be 33-37 chapters long. ****

* * *

><p>A big thank you to Cold Flour who created an account just for me xx you have no idea how warm and light that made my heart feel! Thank you so much for your consideration of my story!**

Thanks again to Whimsicott; I appreciate your frequent reviews and praise!

Thanks to desirae668 for reviewing! You haven't reviewed in a little while, but it's nice to know you're still reading :D

Thanks to Aura for reviewing, your encouragement is much appreciated!

Thanks to silentxangel for your long review, as usual :D I love it when it's extra long! As for the pale part, it was way back and Kazama actually made a dig at her about her physique. **_"I see a girl scarcely five shaku in height with sickly white skin. You remind me of a flower, or maybe a monkey,"**_

And an extra special thanks to everyone who patiently reads every word I write. Your support through the number of visitors and hits is appreciated.

22. Kazama Oni

Please review! :D I love you all!

**To Esvisionik, I actually cried when I read your review :D it's people like you that make the community feel so much more welcome. Your kind words are just the type of support that I needed to get me rolling again. Thank you so much! **

**To silentxangel, the game that distracted me was the horrendous Sims Medieval. It is very, very, pointless x.x but terribly addicting. I thought I'd get lots of negative comments but apparently not! Thank you! **

Q.Q desirae668, your loyalty is unquestionable T^T you guys are all so cute and loveable. Thank you for your dedication!

Arcee-chan, I'm surprised so many people are reviewing even though it was just an author's note T^T everyone is so understanding! I'll have to keep to my schedule now :D no more broken promises.

Also, happy Pi Day. This is also Einstein's birthday and Yoshizawa Akira's too. Happy birthday, old people :D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 21: Kazama Oni.

We moved inland to the forest before stopping to change. I did, at

least. He decided he'd just let his clothes dry on him.

I changed into my last clean yukata; my favorite one with the sunset-like pattern. It wasn't very feminine but quite pleasing nonetheless.

I peeked around the thick trunked tree I had changed behind; satisfied that Kazama was turned respectfully in the opposite direction.

"Are you ready yet?" he asked impatiently.

"Uh-m," he was back to being a jerk, apparently.

He shifted around and appraised me for a moment. He frowned down at my feet.

"Where are your shoes?"

"I lost them when the gigantic squid tried to eat me," I giggled despite the how terrifying it had been. Now that it was over and done with it was kind of funny, especially how it had turned . . . tentacle and fled after I managed to poke my sword into its rubbery body.

Kazama offered me some unexpected assistance then.

"Want me to carry you?"

"W-what?" I stuttered. "No way!"

He might have looked just a bit disappointed but I figured he had just planned something mischievous.

"Don't complain when you step on something sharp," he warned.

I followed his lead onto a narrow path and noticed something was off about him as well.

"Ara? Where's your black haori?"

"I lost it when I was rescuing a certain careless idiot," he remarked.

"You don't have to be so mean about it," I snapped back. I hadn't been careless; I was just taken by surprise.

He was such a grouch. It seemed like it got worse when he had to do something or go somewhere he didn't want to. What an obstinate man, he was the one who decided to go in the end anyways.

"So," I started. "Your little sister stays at home, but what about your older brothers?"

"Interested in them already?" Kazama replied. Did he have a bad relationship with them or something?

I ignored his tone and continued. "What are their names?"

"Chiaki and Chiharu,"

His parents sounded stiff. I thought it was bad enough when my sister and I were both named after flowers. But three sons, all with "chi", in their names? I'd probably get them confused.

"That's kind of mean," I commented without thinking.

"Hn?"

"You seem like the odd one out," their names were similar but Chikage's was the only one that didn't have something to do with light. His was exactly the opposite.

It actually drew a chuckle from him. "You can look at it that way," he didn't seem bitter so I guessed it didn't matter that much.

We walked on in silence. Kazama didn't want to move quickly until his kimono dried.

He had revealed his true form earlier and though I had felt uneasy at first I couldn't deny the reassuring strength in his firm grip. I thought the look suited him; his yellow eyes were even somehow less intimidating.

I snickered aloud and he raised an eyebrow at me. His bangs fit around his horns too well and I wondered if he cut them just so they would.

"When will we arrive?"

Kazama sighed. "Before dark, even if we don't run,"

I walked ahead of him, pulling my damp hair up into a bun.

"Let's run then, maybe we'll arrive in time for a meal,"

"Is your stomach the only thing you think about?" he chided.

"No," I snapped. "It'd just be nice to eat something after running about all day," I almost drowned, that warranted a good supper.

His voice softened, just barely, as though he was reluctant to speak. "What about your feet?"

"My feet? I didn't hurt them while wrestling with the squid."

"I know that, Seaweed Head, I'm just trying to point out that there are lots of things you could step on. You might not notice while running,"

I chortled. "Don't worry; I'm used to running around without shoes on."

He shook his head and swept his hair back, though it quickly fell into place again. "Very well then,"

I skipped away as he tensed to run.

I wondered what sort of changes would occur when we finally reached his home. Meeting his family would probably be an exciting

experience.

* * *

><p>We hadn't eaten since that morning when we left the little teahouse so I was happy when we made it well before sunset.<p>

His home appeared through the trees like a mountain mist had lifted, though the afternoon heat would have evaporated real mist long ago. The leaves of high bushes and healthy trees obscured the view totally from the outside.

Kazama crossed his arms, scanning the grand home with narrowed eyes.

"Your family isn't going to bite you for coming home,"

"You're right; they'll do far worse than bite,"

They couldn't be that bad.

A rich and healthy garden stretched around most of the house and a small koi pond hid behind proud sunflowers.

A neat and round ripple broke the glasslike surface and tranquilly grew in size.

I heard rustling and Kazama released a resigned breath.

A curious form leaned through the flowers, young red eyes twinkling.

"Oka-san will drown you in that pond if she finds out you've been messing with her garden again,"

She abandoned her hiding place, revealing a flower crown weaved through her mousy brown hair. She had delicately refined facial features like Kazama and the same red eyes.

"Onii-san, you're late," she scolded.

Kazama snorted. "I never said when I would be back,"

She waved her fist at him, pouting as she did. "That's not what I'm talking about,"

"What are you talking about, daft little sister?"

She huffed, setting her jaw stubbornly.

I laughed on the inside, trying to keep a straight face otherwise.

So this was Kazama Emi? I had expected her to be a little cuter but I guessed that wasn't the case. She took things too seriously, just like her older brother.

It was strange, thinking of Kazama as an older brother.

"My birthday, stupid. You missed it by a lot. I want a really,

really, amazing gift to make up for it,"

Ho, she really was quite spoiled, and demanding.

"Where would I find such a gift?" Kazama retaliated.

She ignored him and focused on me, tilting her head.

"Who is the older sister?"

It would have been nicer if she had asked me directly but I felt just a bit fuzzy after being called a nee-san. I'd never been addressed that way before.

"Hi there," I greeted, drawing a surprised look from Emi. "I'm Agano Ayame,"

She drew closer, measuring the distance between Kazama and I with her innocent eyes.

"Nee-san, are you marrying my big brother?"

"No!" why did everyone assume that?

She snuggled closer to Kazama and turned her attention from me to him.

"Onii-san, a new Nee-san would be a great present,"

Kazama pushed her back with his elbow, a small and evil grin pulling at the corners of his lips

"Who are you calling a present?" I growled lowly.

I nudged past Kazama and put my hands on Emi's small shoulders. She was just a bit shorter than me.

"Listen here, Emi-chan. I don't know how you grew up but I definitely won't be chained down by that type of thinking,"

She frowned at me, but her eyes were twinkling just a little.

"Nee-san, what are you going to be if not a bride?"

Kazama took the words from my breath.

"A clan leader,"

"What? No way!" she gushed. "That's so cool!"

She pranced away and pulled on Kazama's sleeve. "You two must have been off on an exciting quest,"

Yeah, very exciting coupled with Kazama's temperament.

"Tell me!" she exclaimed, almost swinging from his arm.

"I rescued her from a sea monster," he bragged.

"I still stabbed it," I grumbled.

She practically jumped to me, reaching for my swords. "With one of these?"

Emi's hand connected with the sheath and she pulled back with an exaggerated jerk, as though burned.

"Ah, sorry," it was easy for me to forget that the sword wasn't exactly tame. "It's a bit picky,"

The brief wounded expression vanished and she smiled widely.

"That's so cool! Demon steel really is amazing,"

Kazama scoffed at her as she clutched his sleeve again.

I angled myself slightly more towards the home and caught sight of another blonde haired man.

I startled and Kazama and Emi looked over, unsurprised to see him.

His blonde hair was shorter than Kazama's and stuck up in places. His red eyes were not calculating like Kazama's, rather warmly inviting. An unruly beard hid most of his lips from view.

I couldn't tell if he was one of Kazama's brothers or his father. He appeared youthful despite the facial hair but one could never really be sure with an Oni.

"Welcome back, Chikage. You had us all worried,"

Kazama dipped his head in respond. "I heard from Amagiri that you'd soon be wedding his younger sister. Congratulations,"

"Indeed, in a few more years though." He stood and ambled across the yard. "You've been 'questing'?" he added, having overheard some of our conversation.

"And grave robbing," Kazama replied, rattling the bones he had slung over his shoulder.

The older Oni laughed in good humor and clapped Kazama on the shoulder.

"You smell strongly of salt water," he remarked.

"I had to rescue a certain floundering idiot,"

Why did it seem like the incident was turning less and less from my favor?

"This little lady looks like she could use some rescuing," he chuckled. "Where did you come from?"

Well, at least he was actually addressing me.

"The North," I answered.

He glanced at me skeptically. "You look a bit delicate for that,"

Kazama sorted out the small misunderstanding concisely. "She is from the North, but not a Northerner,"

"I see,"

I noticed he seemed to be standing intentionally away from me, making sure he wasn't closer to me than Kazama was.

Emi ditched Kazama and tugged on the other's fancy kimono. The theme was centered on geometric fan shapes with simple wave and mountain designs, all in dark beige and blue.

"Chiaki-nii! Did you hear? She's going to be a clan leader,"

"Oh, she's not going to marry Chikage?"

My temper was very near snapping. Was that the only role of women outside the mountain?

He continued. "That's a very admirable ambition, but I don't think it will work out. There's no way any clan would let a female Oni lead,"

I took a step towards him, fingers curling into my palm.

"The clan she intends to lead is not one of Oni, but rather a mix of humans and demons."

Chiaki, the oldest brother (I assumed), furrowed his thick, blonde, brows.

"Such a clan exists?"

"The Agano mercenaries," I provided.

His scarlet eyes widened and he crossed his arms. I doubted he knew the Agano. It was probably just the mention of mercenaries.

"You sound like a very independent woman. Are you sure you can keep such a group under control?"

I glowered at him. "Women are just as capable as men."

He tilted his head, bearded chin stubbornly jutting out. "They're certainly capable of keeping a household under control, but not an entire clan,"

He had a friendly face but he was even less understanding than Kazama. If he was armed I would have asked to draw to prove my worth to him. I just wanted to hit him once, or maybe twice.

"Those swords are too clumsy for someone like you to wield. You should put them away,"

I let an angry breath sizzle and met his unabashed gaze as calmly as I could.

Emi seemed letdown and switched brothers, holding Kazama's hand with both of hers.

I felt his expectant gaze on me and agreed that I shouldn't let him trample my dream so easily.

"You don't know anything about me or my family. Forgive me, but your views are too confined. It's a pity you see a lamb where there is a wolf," I was just a little impressed with my words.

He had the nerve to smirk at me. I felt my heart beating furiously in my throat.

"I'm not mistaking what I see,"

I refused to break my stare with him, until we were both forced to look away.

"Oka-san," Kazama greeted.

Their mother had appeared from nowhere; a stern, mesmerizing, look in her jewel green eyes. Her shiny brown hair was done up simply with a kushi comb pulling her hair from her sculpted face.

She had no wrinkles but still managed to exert a certain type of wisdom.

"Amagiri was here more than a week ago. How slow are you?" she insulted.

She marched straight to him, and demanded an answer from his with her hostile posture.

"I was sidetracked," he admitted.

A sharp slap sounded and my jaw dropped.

She was a whole head shorter than Kazama and she had just slapped him with all her might.

She faced me and I froze, hoping she'd somehow not see me.

"And who are you, little one with bold yellow eyes?"

I was pretty sure that was meant to be an insult too but I couldn't be sure.

"Agano Ayame,"

Kazama probably would have spoken up but he was glaring at his mother's back as he rubbed his cheek instead. A red mark had bloomed.

"That is not an Oni name I am familiar with. If that is the case, you must be part of a human family. You dress like one too,"

I was about her height and probably stronger but I felt terribly intimidated by her. She spoke like a grouchy old man.

How could they be so unsupportive of the role of women if they had

such a fierce mother?

"Oka-sama, you're frightening Chikage's guest," Chiaki defended, surprisingly.

"Un, Ayame-nee-san is really nice," Emi pitched in.

Kazama shrugged off the pain in his jaw. "You aren't being very welcoming. You'll scare her away,"

She was outnumbered and her temper seemed to cool.

"Fine. Borrow the bath, your hair is a mess."

* * *

><p>I didn't know whether to regret coming or not by the time I got out of the bath. It was huge despite having to be filled with water heated by a furnace.<p>

A warm and fragrant meal was waiting for me in the room Emi led me to, which was another bonus.

"I'm sorry Oka-san treated you that way." Emi softly apologized. "Oka-san grew up in a home with just men so she's pretty tough,"

I giggled uncomfortably. She was the scariest person I had ever met.

"Nee-san, it doesn't look like you have much with you at the moment. Do you want to borrow some of my clothes?"

She really was quite taken by me. Emi had sat, quietly fidgeting, through my meal without taking her bright red eyes off me.

"That's alright. I'll have time to wash my clothes tomorrow,"

"But you only have one kimono," she reminded. Emi had been fascinated by how lightly I traveled. "I have a really pretty blue one I'd like you to wear,"

Blue really wasn't my color. I loved it, but it just didn't fit with me. I couldn't think of a way to decline.

I looked about the room to distract myself. It was large and empty with a plain white futon and pillow folded in the corner.

I opened the door and stepped out onto the open verandah. Emi followed, anxiously peering about.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Oka-san might scold us for idly sitting about,"

That was almost enough to make me go back inside. Almost.

I was feeling claustrophobic and confined. I guessed after spending a week or so on the move it made it feel stranger to stay in one place.

I suspected it actually had to do with the location; I just didn't want to admit it.

"So," Emi began, "what's your home like?"

"It's less humid, though still warm,"

"That's not what I meant. What do you do, who do you talk to?" she rephrased.

"Oh, "

I had two homes. Which would I talk about first?

"I'm new to Agano but everyone is quite welcoming. They're mostly unusual but funny too. I live with my uncle and he's very caring and understanding, but it's a bit difficult to connect with him."

"And that's in the North?"

"Uh, no. It's actually further south. I grew up in the North and that's still where my older sister lives."

"Is she married?"

I just sighed at his point.

"No, "

"She should marry Chiharu-nii," Emi suggested.

"She can't,"

"How come?"

"Nee-san's a tochigami so she can't leave her land." I explained. I left out her being a half demon.

Emi pursed her lips. "That'd be a problem. Chiharu-nii hates leaving home, "

I snickered. I hadn't seen him yet and I wondered what exactly he looked like. Kazama was actually taller than his brother Chiaki but other than that they looked almost the same. They must have both been the splitting image of their father.

I trained my sight on the garden, focusing on a crimson red maple tree. My breath hitched in my throat and a sharp pain ran through my temple.

The red maple is a great addition to any garden.

Emi knelt next to me and touched my arm lightly.

"Nee-san?"

"I'm okay," I assured. "I'm just tired,"

"You did almost drown today,"

I hadn't been paying attention but I was pretty sure he had dropped from the eaves of the roof.

"Onii-san!" Emi complained.

"It's already dark. Shouldn't you be going to bed?"

Emi puffed up her cheeks. "I'm not a little kid anymore,"

"Right. Go away,"

I laughed and Emi let a frustrated groan out.

"Goodnight, Nee-san."

I waved to her and she stomped away.

"This isn't what you're used to, is it?" Kazama commented.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"What's wrong? You look paler than usual,"

I nibbled my lip. The Beni-hime had appeared for just a moment, like a mirage. I didn't know if she was just bored or if she was intentionally psyching me out.

"I'm fine now," I reassured. "Goodnight,"

* * *

><p>Please review! Just thought I'd mention Kazama's brothers' names are not "aki" as in autumn and "haru" as in spring. They're "bright" and "sunlight" in the same order. I'm not sure, but I think the "kage" in Chikage is just "shadow", hopefully it is, otherwise it's not funny XD their names are also feminine.</p>

I had a lot of trouble while writing it x.x hopefully the next chapter is less icky. I'll have the next chapter ready later today :D

Chapter 22: Training, convincing, and scolding.

23. Training, convincing, and scolding

Please review! I love you all :D you guys are awesome!

Thank you, desirae668, you're a pretty quick reviewer ^^ I actually thought the last chapter was a little on the short side but there were lots of dragged out scenes. That probably made it feel longer XD as for the other brother, Chiharu, he's more my type of guy :D

To Esvisionik, they were happy tears :D I'm glad you're enjoying my story and my writing X)

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 22: Training, convincing, and scolding.

Something had spooked her and I was almost positive that I knew exactly what.

She had been staring directly at a red maple tree in the garden. I'd already had a nagging feeling that the Beni-hime wouldn't so easily rest. There was no point in staying up all night pondering it though.

I turned down the hall back to my room, I wouldn't have to listen to her tossing and turning but I was trading it for something just as annoying.

Chiaki was waiting for me at his room, lying through the doorway and sipping sake.

"Coming from the little lady's room?" he teased.

I scoffed at him. "Emi was bothering her,"

"Right. Seeing as you've spent some time with her you must at least know her Oni name?"

I hated home, mainly because my room was next to Chiaki's and he already acted as though he owned the place.

Our father was still strong and healthy so Chiaki had no reason to act otherwise.

"It's not your concern," I retaliated.

"Come now, I at least have the right to know if she is worthy of my little brother." He sloshed the sake about and tipped it down his throat. "She looks fair, though a little dainty."

I doubted she would appreciate being associated with her lineage by other Oni. I'd do her a favor and keep quiet.

"Who knows?"

"Don't be so guarded. I suspect I might even have the correct guess,"

"Is that so," that sounded like one giant 'maybe' to me.

"There aren't many Oni that I haven't seen. It's only natural that I remember the names associated with the faces,"

I began walking away and he sprang up, cutting me off.

"Yes, there are lesser Oni families that I have not seen. But, I would think one with such striking features would come from a larger, more respected, family."

"And?"

"The Kurosawa Oni have always been secretive. I wonder; have you

interfered with another cardinal family's daughter?"

I growled impatiently and leered at him. I looked slightly down at him.

"Is that the case?" he tried to clarify.

"She was born and raised outside the Way of the Oni. It hardly applies to her,"

Chiaki gazed at me seriously, authority in his red orbs.

"If the blood is there it matters not. Don't think for one minute that they won't demand her back,"

Her half brother had been working independently from the Kurosawa with the help of other Oni. Maybe he had been ordered to obtain her or maybe he just thought capturing and returning her would boost his position in the family.

Either way, he had been unsuccessful and there was no telling when another attempt would be made.

I needn't reveal that to my family whilst she stayed. There was no way they'd encroach on our territory.

I pushed past him and entered my room. Someone had tried to put it back into order after Oka-san had gutted it.

She and Ayame were kind of similar, though Ayame wasn't nearly as dramatic and pessimistic.

Chichiue let her have her own way too often.

I rolled out my futon and settled for the night. She had better not regret coming here in the morning.

* * *

><p>I didn't see her for most of the day. Emi was too busy making her try on every article of clothing she had, like a doll.<p>

I spent my time rearranging my room and tracking down the stuff she had flung in the trees. Most of it would just have to be replaced.

Everyone decidedly ate alone at noon and I wondered just how awkward Ayame felt by now. Did she find the whole experience weird, interesting, or appalling? Probably a combination.

I passed Chiharu, or rather a stack of books, as I walked by the storeroom. There was a small fortune of books in there.

"What are you researching now?" I inquired.

He tried to maneuver the books in his arms but the pile was just too high to do anything about.

"Um, "

I rolled my eyes and halved the load for him.

He nodded appreciatively and blew a lock of flaxen hair from his face.

"You need a haircut," I informed. He was probably too occupied with his work to bother.

"I know, I know. I'll cut it when I get a chance." A strand was stuck in his eyelashes and he blinked his emerald eyes profusely.

He gestured with his chin for me to follow and I shrugged. He still found time to shave, at least.

I didn't mind helping Chiharu. He was bluntly honest about most things so I easily got along with him. There were times when I tried to quarrel with him but he simply didn't argue back.

We returned to his room where another stack of books rested. His room kind of reminded me of Ayame's old room, which I had observed a few times from the doorway. Hers was still twice as bad.

"So?"

"Hm?" he replied absently.

"What are you researching?" I repeated.

"Oh, a little bit of this and a little bit of that." He leafed through a couple leather bound books, as though reminding himself. "The connection between demons and gods and other peculiarities,"

I snorted. Leave it to Chiharu to look into something so elemental. Maybe there was more to it than I could see on the surface.

"Nii-san told me you brought a girl,"

Chiaki would get the shock of his life if he knew her as well as I did. He certainly wouldn't call her a girl.

"You should bring me back someone next time you disappear for a while. Preferably someone older than this Agano girl,"

I sighed, Chiharu wouldn't understand if I tried to defend her now. His first opinion was set and he wouldn't change it unless he saw her himself. Even then, it'd take time and consideration. That was the type of Oni he was.

"Give it back to her, Chiaki-nii!"

Chiharu slid the shoji screen open with a loud crack. Emi had him wrapped around her little finger so he was usually the first to respond to her shrill voice.

"What did you take, Nii-san?"

He was a typical mediator thanks to the way he saw everything in black and white, like paper and ink.

I peered out, eyes popping open.

It was too comical. Ayame and Chiaki were separated by the length of a monstrous thighbone.

Both held either end but didn't pull, though they glared each other down.

I smirked. "What are you hesitating for? He's not that strong,"

She looked up and Chiaki hauled it suddenly. Ayame managed to hold her grip but had to dig her heels in to keep from being lifted off her feet.

"Why are you picking on girls, Nii-san?" Chiharu chided.

"Girls shouldn't be playing with bones," he huffed, still trying to wrench the bone from her.

Chiaki had never been interested in strength. Neither had Chiharu which I guess was why I tried to make it my defining characteristic. Chiaki was 'charismatic' and Chiharu was smart.

I doubted his untried muscles and general inexperience would win the bout of tug-o-war though.

"We're not playing!" Emi defended. "We were having a serious conversation before you came along! You're the one who wants to play,"

Chiharu shook his head. Chiaki was immature despite his age. He made humans look wise.

"Will you just let go of the bone? You are literally behaving like a dog,"

He refused to answer.

Ayame had never struck me as the patient type and that was plainly apparent on her frowning lips.

"You wanna play?" she muttered crossly and braced her weight on one leg. She wiggled her foot out of her other geta.

He was still underestimating her. If he knew what was coming he'd probably let go, despite his stubbornness.

She kicked her leg out straight as a whip, the flat of her foot driving into his stomach. He held his ground but had still clearly been winded.

The kimono she wore was from my sister's collection and didn't quite fit right. The panel wrapped around her knee and I expected the usual butterflies to show. However, her porcelain pale skin was covered with even whiter bandages.

Oho? Was she self-conscious about her tattoos? I thought she adored them and didn't mind showing them off.

She kept her balance on the one foot and used the leverage to her

advantage, forcing him to let go.

Chiaki didn't look too pleased and took a step towards her, as though he wanted another go.

"It's pointless, Nii-san. She's obviously more skilled than you." Chiharu warned. "That's the price you incurred for neglecting tradition,"

Chiaki straightened out his collar and crossed his arms, staring down at Ayame who responded with her own superior glance.

"She seems like a good friend for you," he taunted. "You can beat each other up,"

Ayame laughed shortly. "Kazama doesn't fight fairly."

I was surprised she even admitted that I would win when she was still trying to show off. I took it as a compliment but still scowled at her.

"I do, you're just too limited," I couldn't have her thinking she was strong enough. If she wanted to stand on her own power she'd have to train a bit harder.

"I am not,"

"Fairness isn't something you should prioritize," I educated. "Fairness doesn't count in a real fight,"

"Villain," she retorted.

Chiaki was uninterested in our disagreement and stalked off too nurse his wounded pride. It was his own fault for being so puny and I thought it was rather funny that a woman had put him in his place.

"Chiharu-nii!" Emi beckoned, charging over to preoccupy his attention. "Isn't Ayame-nee-chan so cool?"

It sounded like they were getting along splendidly.

"She is certainly a match for Chikage,"

Her eye twitched but it seemed like she had finally resigned herself to that sort of comment. It'd only been a day. Just how much had Emi pestered her?

She addressed me. "I'm thinking of returning to Agano soon. There are a few things I need to check out with Ichirou,"

"You just can't deal with what you've gotten yourself into," I teased.

Ayame glowered at me with her golden eyes. "I'm serious. I have more important matters to attend to."

I could understand that. She had a fair bit on her shoulders now that she had seriously committed herself to becoming Agano's future leader.

Emi didn't and she let a whiny cry past her dumbly parted lips.
"Nee-chan, you're leaving already?"

"Uh-m, probably tomorrow."

Emi skittered back to Ayame's side, real or fake tears glittering in her eyes.

"But we were just getting to know each other!"

It was plainly obvious that she'd struck a heart cord. Emi had already managed to successfully worm her way into Ayame's heart.

"I'm sorry, Emi-chan. I really need to sort some things out,"

Emi hugged her and buried her face against Ayame's chest. "Can't you sort it out here?" she mumbled.

"Uh, I don't think so," Ayame stuttered, trying to gently detach her.

All the while, Chiharu watched, ready to help persuade if Emi began to lose the plea.

"Please stay! Just a little longer . . . please?"

I couldn't tell if the sob that caught in her throat was genuine or not.

Ayame awkwardly patted her back. "I guess I could stay for a little longer,"

Emi squealed triumphantly and squeezed Ayame tightly with her embrace before dancing off.

"I'll go tell Oka-san!"

"You don't have to," Ayame called but Emi often barreled to her next destination.

Chiharu was about to go back into his room but I gestured for him to stay a little longer.

"So, what's so important that you think you should leave so soon?"

"Well," Ayame began. "I have the bones for my own sword to be forged now and I also want to put the Imperial Chrysanthemum to rest as soon as possible. I want to look more into her background as well. Someone in Agano might have a clue about her true form."

I nodded. These were pressing matters for her. "The swords can wait until you've at least mastered your own sword style, though dealing with her is considerably more urgent."

Chiharu's interest had already been perked. Not only did he realize we were talking about demon blades but also something else. Once he heard about something he generally wanted to know the minute details

on it.

"I don't really know where to start looking. Nee-san didn't tell me much and it doesn't seem like there are many other similar cases. She might be completely unique,"

"Chiharu's very studious. He might have some clues,"

By now, Chiharu was almost coming apart from the prospect of a new research project.

But Ayame's face fell. She bit her lip and played with her discarded sandal until she finally put it back on.

"Sorry. I can't share that with him."

"Why?" I guess I didn't really understand how she felt about the Beni-hime. I had experienced it firsthand so it was only natural that she could talk about it with me. Then again, she hadn't actually told me the Beni-hime had been awake yesterday.

She was probably trying to work it out by herself, though I wasn't quite sure if that was the best and safest method.

"Well, it looks like you'll be staying for a while. You might as well finish developing your sword style here. Maybe you'll find a clue by going through Chiharu's books. He'll let you borrow some,"

Chiharu nodded vigorously. No doubt he'd figure out what she was trying to understand based solely on the books she read.

Ayame half smiled. "I guess I can count on you as my sparring partner?"

I chuckled. "Sure,"

"And you for your books, Kaza- Chiharu-san,"

That irritated me just a little. She was already calling him by his first name, just for convenience?

Chiharu seemed startled for once and bowed quickly before excusing himself with another bow.

He didn't leave home very often. I hadn't considered that he might actually have been nervous around young women.

* * *

><p>Supper was a painful affair.<p>

Family meals were usually quiet but uncomfortably so when a guest was involved. Our family was small and unused to most social interactions. Our hospitality wasn't the greatest.

With the meal finished an eternity after it had begun Oka-san and Emi stood up to collect the dishes. Ayame tried to follow suit but Oka-san snapped at her.

"What are you doing, you dumb girl? You are the guest, sit

down, "

"Butâ€" "

"Now. "

She sat, hands folded in her lap.

Chichiue disguised a quiet chortle with a cough and Chiaki turned his peeved expression at the wall.

Our father was looking as imposing as ever. His slightly worn face hadn't changed since I was a kid and his red eyes still shone clearly. I thought his hair might have dulled a bit in recent years but it might just have been my mind playing tricks on me.

I didn't really expect my family, the Kazama Oni, to change much in the upcoming years. We were small but that meant it was easy to keep quietly existing while other's fought and died.

It was a selfish existence.

Oka-san and Emi returned a moment later and Emi skipped over to Ayame, cheery grin stretching her small lips.

"Come take a bath with us, "

Ayame hesitated. "Um, " there was no way to hide her tattoos if she did.

"Come on, little Oni, " Oka-san prompted, tapping her foot impatiently.

"Butâ€" "

"Do not question me. "

"Yes! "

I couldn't wait to see, or at least hear, Oka-san's reaction to her tattoos.

* * *

><p>I was disappointed. I didn't have an excuse to be near enough to the baths to hear anything, though I did hear Emi gushing when I was instructed to stoke the furnace.<p>

I guess that meant Oka-san hadn't skinned her, though she definitely had chewed her out. She was dead set against things like tattoos and even certain hairstyles.

Hair was hair to me. I didn't care as long as it wasn't too strange. Amagiri's actually bothered me sometimes.

I waited on the deck outside Ayame's room for a while, hoping to provoke her by asking about her tattoos. Maybe I could even get Emi to tell me about the tattoo on her back later.

Sure enough, about five minutes later she turned the corner, hair

done neatly and plainly. She looked over her shoulder before she pulled out the pins, massaging her scalp.

Ayame jumped when she saw me. Oka-san could make the bravest men paranoid.

She breathed a breath of relief. "It's just you,"

"Thanks," I sarcastically rebuked.

She twisted her hair up loosely and leaned against the railing. "Did you get your opinion on tattoos from your mother?"

I snickered. "You could say that,"

"I thought she was seriously going to try and remove them for a moment." She hung her head over the rail, as though she were feeling sick. "Uwah, your mother is scary,"

"She's just strict. Oka-san's actually kind in her own way once you get past that. She'll probably treat you nicer after a couple weeks,"

She moaned and sat down. "I want to go home,"

I laughed. If she really wanted to go home she would have long ago.

"It's training," I suggested. "If you can survive living with her for a while you can definitely take anything an entire clan throws at you,"

"I'm not sure I'm convinced,"

I patted her back roughly.

"You'll get used to it,"

* * *

><p>Sorry this took so long, but it's still Wednesday here :D there might be a couple spelling mistakes or other errors since I was in such a hurry but I'll check and revise it when I get a chance. If you see anything, just let me know ^^

Please review :D

24. The first snowfall in the West

Please review! :D

Thanks to Esvisionik for reviewing again, it's greatly appreciated :D the Beni-hime certainly would make the rest of Chikage's family think differently about her XD

To silentxangel: I love your long reviews, they're very lovely :D

**Yeah, their family is very strict, though still not typically so.

They break rules, have one hell of a mom (I spell it with one 'a' since I'm lazy XD), and generally don't fit in with the other Oni.
**

You also seemed to like Chiharu. I like him, he's my kind of guy :D what I meant by him seeing things in black and white was that he doesn't pick sides based on who is on which. He clearly sees who is at fault (the exception being Emi) and doesn't base his info on uncertain factors. I don't think Chiharu can be prejudice, he's simply smart with no depth to his actually musings. He kind of reminds me of a calculator, though it is possible to get under his skin xD

As for Chikage . . . yes, he's pretty smart, but he's also as stubborn as a mule. He does prize his honor and what not but he also fights unfairly at times. Maybe not unfairly, but definitely sneakily. He always had a hidden ace; his apparent hand to hand combat skills (kicked Okita quite nicely xD), clever sword maneuvering (caught Okita's blade in the same scene and let go of his blade to cut Chizuru later), and at the end of the first season he even revealed that Oni had their own true form. I kind of feel that he might have been egging Hijikata on to see if he could fight evenly with him. Actually, that's probably exactly what he was doing xD

Also, you know Kazama has ulterior motives for having Ayame stay XD he just learned with Chizuru that being straight forward isn't always the answer. But as you mentioned, Ayame needs a swift brick to the head to catch on x.x

**To desirae668, I was cutting it close with the last chapter but I still made it :D don't worry, I still have to check before typing either name, making sure I haven't mixed up who's who XD you won't believe this but when I'm writing it on paper at school I almost always start writing Ayame instead of Emi. **

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 23: First snowfall in the West.

I stayed for another week, and then another. The weeks melded together and eventually months had passed.

My place amongst the Kazama's family was still a bit shaky though I was at least sort of getting along with their mother now.

It had been hard at first and I'd told Kazama I was leaving about ten times. Either he or his sister managed to convince me to stay each time. I'd given up all together when he accused me of being a coward.

I assumed everyone was already used to being constantly insulted. Their mother (who insisted I call her Ami-san now) had an incredibly sharp tongue. She was rarely in a good mood and tacked on cruel words whenever she could.

Occasionally, Kazama-dono would try to intervene but he hardly got two words in before she set on him instead. He might have done that

just to get her off our cases, frequently mine.

I had thought Ami-san might have been a feminist but she treated me the same as she treated her sons. Either she didn't distinguish between genders or she just didn't consider me a woman at all.

She was more civil to Emi, probably because she was the youngest and the only daughter. I felt just a little jealous.

Ami-san particularly abhorred seeing or hearing Kazama and me sparring. Maybe she did think it was strange for women to learn the way of the sword. She didn't seem very strong so I guessed she was used to getting her way because she had Kazama-dono backing her.

According to Kazama, his father was the strongest individual Oni right now. I believed it too. His wife might have had him under her finger but he exuded a sort of wisdom and strength that could only be matched by Takeshi-sama.

But, I had realized that the Kazama Oni were still weaker than the other cardinal families, and maybe even other, more average, Oni families. I thought the order might have been North, South, West, and East.

I knew the Northern Oni were quite strong. They had many in their family and also a hardy northerly endurance. The Kurosawa Oni were probably still better off since they had a couple Oni like me; Oni who were immune to silver.

On the other hand, Chizuru was probably the only one left in her Eastern family. She must have felt just a little despair from that. She still had Hijikata though.

I heard footsteps turning down the bend in the hallway and sat up. I'd been lying on the outside decking, watching a ring of ice form around the fishpond.

Emi was the only person here who made a sound when she approached. She actually sounded a bit louder than normal today. I wondered if she'd been arguing with Chiaki again. He was always irritating her.

She stomped over to me, a sullen expression on her face, turning her small lips down.

"What's wrong, Emi-chan?"

She huffed and a breath of smoky white vapor escaped.

"Oka-san refuses to let me get a tattoo, even a small one."

I sputtered. I was dead. Ami-san was going to kill me and dump me in the koi pond with weighted stones tied to my wrist and ankles.

She had the right to blame me, seeing as Emi never would have asked if she hadn't seen my tattoos. I hoped she could rationally blame me in return.

"You'd regret it if she let you," I informed, hoping to persuade her

to let the matter drop.

"No I wouldn't," she stubbornly replied. "Do you regret getting yours?"

"Sometimes," I'd told Kazama before that I only regretted it for a few days afterwards but that was no longer true.

"Why?" she demanded.

"Well," how to put this, I pondered. "There are some people, like your mom," and at least one of your brothers, "who think tattoos are dirty."

Emi pouted. "I'm sure there are people who think tattoos look nice too,"

I grimaced. "Well, I think tattoos are nice. But they are still . . . undesirable?"

"Undesirable?" she repeated. It had come out to halfheartedly when I'd said it.

"Uh-m. Men dislike women who have tattoos because they think it makes themselves appear less manly," I was surprised by the conviction in my statement. I bet Kazama secretly wanted a tattoo but didn't have the guts to get one. He was jealous.

Emi processed that for a moment, her brows knit together. "I asked Onii-san what he thought about tattoos. He said 'it depends' so I'm not sure you're right, Nee-chan."

"Kazama said that?"

"Uh-m, and then he asked about the tattoo on your back,"

That pervert! "Did you tell him?"

She giggled. "No way! I asked him how he knew and he refused to answer,"

I stood up and leaned against the railing, watching my own misty breath fan out in front of my eyes.

"Nee-san, it's a bit cold." Emi was already rubbing her hands together, breathing on them.

I shrugged. "It's colder where I'm from. Snow would have already been falling,"

"There's already snow in the mountains here," she defended.

"I noticed,"

"Huh, how?"

"I went down to the lake with Kazama a few days ago," I provided. The trees were tall and thick here and made it seem like you were inside a glass ball, especially when you looked up at the sky.

Emi grinned. She was growing up to be as lecherous as her brother.

"It's just easier to train there. There's no one to make comments and nothing to get in the way." We used to practice in the yard, until I accidentally fell on Ami-san's flowers.

The garden was mostly devoid of flora by now but I still didn't want to risk breaking off a tree branch or flattening a shrub.

"Is that all you and my brother do?" she complained.

"Well," I didn't want to encourage her to believe something was going on between me and her brother. Anytime the conversation turned in that direction she jumped to the sister-in-law conclusion. "We do talk,"

"While you train?" she questioned.

"Uh-m, but we talk normally too,"

"What kinds of things do you talk about?" she inquired innocently.

"Um," he still made perverted remarks, thought I wouldn't tell Emi that. Besides, he generally avoided saying anything suggestive in the presence of his family members.

We did discuss swords a lot. That had stemmed from last week's thoughts about getting the Douji-giri back. In the end, Kazama had decided to leave it for a while long.

Kuri probably wouldn't give it back until I seriously became clan leader anyways.

"I don't know, random stuff," I finally answered.

Emi wasn't satisfied with it but set to warming her hands instead.

"Can we go inside?"

I sighed. I hated being confined. "Sure,"

* * *

><p>Days and nights passed quickly here, just like at home before I met Kazama. I wondered if that meant living here had become a norm for me.<p>

I rolled over in bed, gazing at the shoji screen. It practically glowed from the outside light. Snow had fallen, I could just tell.

Groggily, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. The quiet hummed in my ears and I briefly thought of the Hime. I hadn't heard from her since that one time, though I dreamt of red maple trees and her voice plenty of times afterwards.

I got up and dressed in a double lined kimono borrowed from Emi. I

even pulled on a pair of tabi socks. Tabi socks drove me nuts. I hated the feeling of the material between my big toes.

In truth, I wasn't used to this cold. The hot spring ran directly under Nee-san's home on Takeshi-sama's mountain. The warmth seeped through the floor boards, making it pleasantly warm all year round.

That certainly wasn't the case here.

I gathered my hair up and lazily wrapped it around my neck. Surprisingly, it stayed like it was and I skipped the process of doing it up. I just hoped I wouldn't run into Ami-san.

I opened the screen door, squinting against the bright light reflecting off the thick blanket of snow that had fallen quietly during the night.

The shoes I'd borrowed from Ami-san (Emi's were slightly too small) were high enough from the ground to walk in the snow without getting my feet too wet.

I tiptoed out, finding the sandals on the steps. After dusting the feathery snow off the geta I stepped into them.

The snow was subtly crunchy and seemed perfect for making a fort, but the quantity wasn't met.

I rolled a small body, squishing it into an oval before scrapping some details into it. It was a habit of mine to make a snow bunny on the first snowfall.

Satisfied, I stood up and backed into someone. I nearly jumped out of my skin, but thanks to that I was paying attention and it was easy to deduce that it was Kazama.

He was the only person around here who would walk that close without announcing his presence anyways. He was either doing it on purpose or just didn't realize how quiet he really was.

I liked to think I would notice if he was sneaking up on me, rather than just approaching quietly. If he had something planned he'd probably give off some unpleasant sort of vibe.

Scowling, I turned to face him. He was frowning down at my snow bunny.

"Are you a kid?"

I growled under my breath. Why did he keep asking when he already had his own answer? I didn't know if it matched up with mine but whatever.

I had to learn to just accept his opinion. The more I argued the more he teased me. Obviously, that type of situation made me frustrated and that usually meant Ami-san found a way to scold me.

He was still eying the bunny, as though he wanted to step on it and be done with it.

"Do you have a problem with my snow bunny?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Emi does the same thing. What's the point?"

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "There isn't really a point. Haven't you ever made a snowman or a snow fort?"

Kazama shook his head. He didn't seem like the kind of person who felt inclined to test his artistic talent.

"What about snowballs? You've at least had a snowball fight, right?"

He shrugged. "Oka-san probably outlawed that during Chiaki's and Chiharu's childhood. I've never felt compelled to test the theory here though,"

I giggled. "I was beginning to think you hadn't even had a snowball fight,"

Kazama rolled his eyes. "Shiranui chucked one at the back of my head and I gave him a bloody nose. That was the extent of our 'snowball fight',"

I shook my head. "You punched him, didn't you?"

He didn't reply, which was a good enough answer.

Kazama had told me about Shiranui a while ago. He sounded a bit weird to me. Apparently he was extremely abiding of the Way of the Oni but still found it in him to use a gun instead of a proper weapon.

I was surprised when Kazama defended him, explaining that he'd injured his leg as a child and couldn't full utilize his speed, especially in a fight.

I thought there were probably a lot of people and Oni who considered Kazama a ruthless killer. His skill was undeniable but there was a softer side to him than he let on.

He didn't completely ignore the feelings of those around them, though made it clear that his own feelings were priority. He defended himself, his close friends, and never forgot his own rules.

"What are you staring at?" he interrupted.

I blushed and looked down at my little bunny. It wasn't my fault I was deeply thinking and looking at his face at the same time.

"Nothing much," I responded, glancing up at him again. He was wearing a proper scarf around his neck. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Nothing much," he imitated. "Just stretching my legs,"

"I suppose the mountains must be under several shaku of snow by now," I commented.

"That's an accurate assumption," he agreed. "There's no chance of

anyone getting very far up them now,"

He almost sounded relieved and I wondered if he was trying to keep me here until spring. I didn't think I could handle that. I was so close to finishing my sword style too.

The moment was spoiled when Chiaki sauntered out. He had no reason to be out, other than to pick on his little brother and me. I think Chiaki's favorite pastime was strutting about.

He opened his mouth to say something but was thankfully cut off by the swift rustling of tree branches. He tensed up and I angled myself toward the woods, waiting for whatever was coming.

Chikage stepped in front of me and I tried to nudge past him but he wouldn't have it. What was the point of training if he was just going to get in my way when there was a possible threat?

I comprehended my thoughts a second later. I had just thought 'Chikage' instead of 'Kazama' and sourly blamed his brother. Really, what compelled their parents to name them like that?

I didn't have any time for more brooding as the thing finally burst through the trees. I relaxed immediately, though Kazama brandished the regular sword he had taken to carrying about.

"It's okay,"

Kazama lowered the sword. "That's one of your sister's shikigami, isn't it?"

I nodded and moved closer to the white form, hunched over from the exertion. It vaguely resembled a canine at the moment, probably to help it move quicker through the countryside.

It raised its head, displaying the 'Maru' tag. I placed my hand over the dark, bloody, ink.

"What are you doing?" Chiaki hissed. "What's her connection to that thing?" he asked his brother. He seemed spooked by it.

"Shh,"

I absorbed the information it carried, Nee-san's awkward voice. She was just catching me up with the happenings at the shrine. It was about time.

My brows shot up and I grinned widely. I wondered what Kazama's reaction would be to that tidbit.

The message ended abruptly and I scowled. She could have gone on longer, should have even, but it seemed like she wasn't into it.

_I'm doing fine, _I thought clearly to Maru. _I'm in the middle of training to become the head of Agano, so nothing really interesting has happened. I'm staying with Kazama's family and they're nice enough. I've become good friends with his little sister. _

I didn't feel like going on either and urged Maru to hurry back to my

sister. She should have sent Taro instead. Maru was better at defending and attacking. She'd need him if anything should happen.

"What the hell was that ugly thing?" Chiaki demanded once it had bounded away.

I glowered at him. "A shikigami. It does the bidding of omnyouji and tochigami,"

He glared back, "So which is your sister?"

"A tochigami,"

He appeared unimpressed, though I wondered what he was thinking.

"What was it here for?"

"It was just delivering a short message,"

That perked Kazama's interest. "Really? What was it about?"

"Nee-san was just letting me know how things were up North," I didn't say much about that. Nee-san had mentioned that the Northern Oni seemed a bit restless. "I'll tell you more about it later,"

Chiaki snorted, catching on that I wasn't saying anything because he was present. "Your hair looks ridiculous. You better fix it before breakfast,"

I huffed and walked past him, returning to my room. "Are we training today?"

"No, the lakeshore will be too slick thanks to the snow. We'll wait a couple days for it to even out more,"

"Talk to you later, then,"

* * *

><p>It wasn't until the evening when we spoke. I was kept busy by Emi all day long, making more snow bunnies and chatting in the room closest to the furnace.<p>

We both leaned against the rail outside my room, watching small flakes of snow drift down. I loved this type of weather.

"So, what did your sister have to say?"

I sighed. "Not much, actually. Just a regular report on the shrine and a stiff greeting. She mentioned in passing that the Northern Oni seemed a bit off. They've been weird before so she doesn't really pay much attention anymore."

"This is the first message since you left though," Kazama remarked. "That can't be all she had to say?"

The grin from earlier tugged at my lips. "Chizuru and Hakuouki are married now,"

"Ho?" Kazama prodded me with his elbow. "Is that all?"

"Chizuru is pregnant," I felt extremely happy for her. She was so lucky to be having a child under such normal conditions. I prayed for her new family to prosper and have good fortune. She was well deserving of it.

"Hakuouki is certainly wasting no time," Kazama retorted.

I smacked my knuckles on his forearm, "Be more considerate. He's still a human; he doesn't have the same luxury with time."

Kazama snickered and I shot him an icy look. He never took things like this seriously.

"Anyways, goodnight, you prick."

He ruffled my hair as he turned to leave, catching my hair tie. It came loose and he walked off with it, acting completely natural.

I would have loved to run after him and scuffle for it, but it was late and his mother's wrath at bedtime was ten times worse.

"Goodnight, Seaweed Head,"

* * *

><p>Please review! :D I love you all.

Gosh, that was terrible x.x I took up almost a whole page with author's comments. That must be criminal xD

**Obviously the part about Shiranui is completely made up. I'm just picking on the fact that he uses a gun instead, keeps pace with Harada, and disappears using Oni techniques only a few times.
**

Chapter 24: Avalanche, crushed wings.

By the way, say 'Chiaki' ten times really fast and tell me what you think it sounds like ;} and I'm sorry this update was so late at night x.x I was swamped with homework and almost forgot to post it x.x forgive me T.T blame the school work ;D

25. Avalanche, crushed wings

Please review! You guys are awesome :D

**Oh, silentxangel, I love you =w= your long reviews are amazing. I'm glad someone else noticed that Chiaki's name sounds like Chucky when repeated over and over again T.T **

**The time lapse was from early August (we missed Ayame's birthday, but did Kazama?) to sometime in December, when the snow from China and Russia starts to cross the Sea of Japan. **

**I shouldn't really comment on everything just yet, since a lot of

your queries will probably be answered in the next couple chapters :D**

I'm glad you don't mind my personal effects :D as for buddy who was being touchy feely, he laid off after a while. I think I embarrassed him when I said "Don't touch me," in the middle of class, while the teacher was talking xD

EverRose808, thanks for reviewing again :D the old Ayame would have thrown multiple snowballs at Kazama and his older brother, however, she's probably terrified of what Ami-san would do if she saw xD also, it seems a few people have mentioned wanting to see Amagiri and Shiranui. I might get a chance but don't count on it D:

XDDD well said, Whimsicott. Yeah, Kazama is being surpassed by Hijikata. My argument for Hijikata is that his life has been cut in half, if not more, by the Ochimizu. Sadly and realistically, he won't have much time left to spend with Chizuru and their kids D':

I don't think you've reviewed in a while, SilverStarlight :D how are you? I just love Hijikata x Chizuru! It's the only Chizuru pairing I love :D

Thanks for your review, desirae668 :D knowing Kazama he'll just carry it around until she asks for it back. If she doesn't, well I guess he's keeping it xD as for Chiaki's name, I'm surprised you got Jackie xD I had to try it again to be sure. I still get Chucky D: that's probably because it was the first conclusion I ended up with xD

**KrimsonRayne, I adore your name! Thank you for reviewing. If you're having trouble with POVs, it's even numbers for Kazama and odd numbers for Ayame. I'm glad you like the story! You'd draw Ayame? :D yes please! Just tell me where to find it when you finish it X3 you'll post it on deviant, right? Free advertisement! XD **

Woot, record set on reviews per chapter :D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 24: Avalanche, crushed wings.

Summer had quickly turned to autumn. Now the leaves had fallen and been buried beneath a blanket of pristine white snow. Ayame had changed as quickly as the seasons, though not as drastically.

She was trying to become more understanding, more tolerant. It showed in her sword style but I couldn't tell if it was a good thing or not.

Emi was spending a lot of time with her too. I had to wonder when she found time to research the Beni-hime, or things that were at least similar to the Hime.

I asked Chiharu what books she had been reading but he hadn't figured out what she was looking for yet. He had already caught onto her condition though. If she had wanted to hide it she shouldn't have been targeting only books about curses and possessions.

Chiharu practically begged me to tell him more so I told him to ask Ayame. He seemed incapable of approaching her.

Not like it was that easy to talk to her anyways. She was always with Oka-san or Emi. I only had a chance to train with her for a bit every afternoon.

From what I could tell, she had developed a habit of wandering off early in the morning. Maybe she was trying to make some time for herself. I wouldn't have even noticed, but thanks to the snow she left tracks. She either didn't notice or just didn't care to explain.

I could see the footprints in the snow from where I sat in front of my room and that bugged me more than anything else.

She must have known she wasn't being discrete. I wondered if she was waiting for me to say something about it.

"Give it back, Chiaki-nii!"

It was times like these that I wished I still smoked. I'd decided to quit though, and I wasn't about to start again. If I did it'd only give that idiot a reason to start as well.

"Prove that you are worthy of it," Chiaki taunted. What was he up to now?

"Fine!"

She stormed off and I rolled my eyes. Emi was just a kid but Chiaki was no better. Sometimes he was worse.

* * *

><p>I met Ayame and Oka-san while walking back from the storeroom. Chiharu had requested that I get him a couple books.<p>

They were doing laundry, probably heading to the furnace to heat some water up to make it easier.

"Good afternoon," I greeted.

Oka-san blatantly ignored me. I hadn't done anything recently so she must have been in a bad mood. Then again, Oka-san hated winter. She'd be grouchy until the snow melted away and the sakura replaced it. There wasn't actually a whole lot of sakura around here.

Ayame nodded back. "Good afternoon," she was carrying the brunt of the laundry.

"Oka-san has you running about again?" I commented.

Oka-san glared at me and Ayame tried to smile. "I'm technically freeloading here; I have to do what I can to help,"

Oka-san sniffed delicately, her version of a snort. "You remember it well,"

Whether Ayame intended to make a comment or not, she was cut off by a sudden rumble.

Perplexed, she looked up, squinting at the cloudy sky. An unsettled crease formed between her eyebrows.

"An avalanche?"

Oka-san scoffed. "I am surprised there has not been one sooner. The weather turned rather mild today,"

Indeed, the mountains on the other side of the lake were quite steep and the warmer weather today had made it particularly risky. Anything could have set off a large avalanche.

Chiaki appeared, white and pasty, lips drawn tightly. His unease immediately spread to me.

"Have you seen Emi?" he breathed tightly.

"No, "

Chiaki ran his hand through his messy short hair nervously. "She said she was going to prove me wrong. There are scattered footprints leading to the mountain,"

When he said 'scattered' he was referring to the large space between the steps of someone who was pseudo teleporting. I felt a lump growing in my throat. The rumble could still be heard.

"My little girl went up the mountain?" Oka-san whispered. She turned in the direction of the lake, wanting to bolt but knowing she couldn't possibly make it in time.

Ayame dropped her basket, springing onto the rooftop. I followed, glimpsing the dusty cloud at the peak. It was building, the further it reached the more snow that got caught up in it.

We could only hope that Emi wasn't above the tree line yet. She'd have a chance if she could get away before it hit the trees.

"You trust me, right?"

Startled, I gaped at her. She couldn't possibly mean to try and get there before it covered the whole mountainside.

She stepped out of her geta, cracking her toes against the roof tiles. I grabbed her arm and she shook me off, staring intently towards the mountain, already half engulfed in the sliding snow.

"Fight fire with fire, or pit disaster against disaster," she muttered to herself. "Wake up, you stupid princess!"

Ayame's hair burned red, a wave of green rolling through it before disappearing. Her horns emerged, crimson stained. A ring of shining gold remained in her eyes, otherwise dominated by a savage scarlet.

I reached for her again. _You don't have to_; the words were even on

the tip of my tongue. I was so slow, how had I not realized sooner?

She pushed off the roof with force, the heavy tiles breaking away under her tabi clad feet. In a flash she was gone, my eyes tracing just a faint red blur.

I jumped down, grabbing Chiaki by the shoulder.

"What was that?" he questioned.

"No time to explain, just move,"

Chichiue had appeared and looked towards the path leading to the lake and the mountains just beyond. He had probably caught the gist of what was going on.

Oka-san grabbed his hand. "Take me with you," she pleaded. She seemed years younger, vulnerable even.

I pivoted, Oni blood coursing through my veins as I sprinted towards the lake. The cold wind pinched at my cheeks but I didn't have the time to slow down.

It was easily the fastest I had ever run. I arrived in time to catch a glimpse of Ayame, her red hair just a pinprick across the lake.

The snow was moving fast, broken trees and upturned earth tumbling down with it. It was almost on top of her, yet she moved parallel with it. My chest seized. She must have seen Emi.

Chichiue came to a stop behind me, Oka-san hanging onto his arm to support herself. Chiaki arrived behind them, gazing pale faced at the snow as it finished its decent; smashing onto the icy surface of the lake, the base of the almost vertical mountain.

The ice cracked open in places, piles of snow sinking into the frigid water. Powdered snow swept across and a chilling wind nipped at us.

I stood, numbly assessing the situation. It was the worst avalanche I had seen in my years here. There was no comparing it to any that had come before.

Chiharu had arrived, panting. He drew closer without saying a word. We were all at a loss for words.

I felt his hand on my shoulder and he broke the silence with a shaky breath.

"Chikage, there's nothing we can do. Who knows where they were carried?"

I moved closer to the frozen lakeshore. Ayame had been possessed by the Beni-hime at the time; there was no way she would have let her host die. The Hime had no reason to save my sister, and yet she had clearly been moving towards something.

Ayame had been in control. That was the only explanation. That

spoiled princess would never have risked her host just to charge in to protect someone she had no connection to.

"Chikage," Chiharu spoke quietly. "There's no point,"

"There is!" I shouted back. "That idiot wouldn't die so pathetically,"

Chiharu's façade disappeared. "They are just two girls, two weak girls! Even you would have been crushed by the weight and debris," he kicked a rock jutting from the ground, sending it flying through the trees. "There is no hope for them," at that, his voice quivered.

I faced the mountain again and something fluttered past my eyes.

The glittering blue widened my eyes and I watched the small butterfly float to the ground, completely incompatible with the winter scene.

It melted, or broke apart, leaving a red splotch on the snow.

"Was that a shikigami?"

Somewhere in my mind I was surprised Chiaki remembered she had that kind of background. I didn't even know if she was capable of creating shikigami.

A second butterfly appeared, as though from nowhere. I held my hand out, palm to the sky. It landed, clumsily, quivering as its wings disintegrated.

_Help . . . _

There was only a drop of blood left in my hand now, but it felt as though there was a string tied to my wrist, urging me onwards.

Without another word, I bounded across the lake, avoiding the shattered ice. I prayed that I was being led to them by that strange force.

Chiaki followed me. He better have felt responsible for this.

The string continued to pull me, though I felt panicked. There was nothing but white as far as I could see, except for a few uprooted trees and boulders mixed in.

It became slack and I stopped, spinning in a circle.

"What is it?" Chiaki asked hopefully.

I didn't respond. There was a bloody spatter by a thick trunked tree, blurred as it soaked into the snow.

I placed my hands on the tree, searching for a firm grip. It was heavy and I barely budged it. That was probably a good thing.

"Don't!"

I gently let go. "Emi?"

"Nee-chan . . . Nii-san, Ayame-nee-chan!" her voice was muffled by the snow between us but the terror was unmistakable.

There had to be a pocket of air or something, probably from the tree.

"Nee-chan," Emi sobbed.

I froze, fighting the urge to dig. I was afraid of making it worse.

"She's bleeding!"

A little blood hardly meant anything to an Oni but it worried me that Ayame hadn't spoken up. How bad was it?

"Emi, calm down, we'll get you out!" I called. I felt a shiver taking hold of my body. "What's Ayame's condition?"

Chiaki made to move the tree and I shooed him away, motioning for him to dig instead. There wasn't anything else we could really do.

"There's a—" there's a branch stuck in her back!"

My stomach tightened, a revolting feeling overcoming me temporarily. "Where is Chichiue?" I questioned.

Chiaki looked up. "He's coming. Chiharu's helping Oka-san over,"

I set myself to digging and Chiaki pitched in as well, his hands already turning red from the cold.

We dug almost directly under the tree, reaching them in just a couple minutes. Even in the muted light, it was possible to see the blood soaking into the snow.

Emi was lying flat on her back, hands on the tree trunk, helping to brace it as blood dripped on her torso from Ayame who knelt over her.

She held the trunk up with her back, one arm sinking into the snow, keeping the tree from flattening them. The other arm was stuck under a boulder, blood splattered on the wall of stone and snow.

The tree was not without limbs and one had pierced her side, through and through. She was still maintaining her Oni transformation, and therefore her consciousness. The Beni-hime had apparently left, leaving part of her white hair dyed with blood that ran from a wound on the back of her head.

"Kazama?" she choked.

I rolled into the narrow space, taking some of the weight from the tree onto my shoulders. "How are you holding up?"

She half chuckled, half coughed. "Not bad, can you do me a favor?"

I took a deep breath, trying to ward the fear from my voice.
"Sure,"

"Get Emi-chan out of here first," Emi protested but Chiaki was already hauling her out. "Break the damned twig off so you can move me,"

I cleared my throat. "What about your arm?"

She must not have noticed it and painfully twisted her neck to check. "Change of plans, break the damned twig and then get the damned tree off my back.

Her hair was in her partly in her face, some propped back by her pointed ears. Through the curtain of white hair I could see blood escaping from her parted lips.

There was just enough room on the 'twig' for me to place my hand and break it off. I tried to be as gentle as I could but she still gasped.

"I'm alright," she reassured.

"Chiaki, pull that tree up, now."

Chichiue must have been up there too, because the tree moved almost effortlessly.

With the weight of the tree gone, Ayame seemed to relax and almost collapsed before I could catch her.

"Get that damned twig out of my side," she cursed.

"You'll bleed out,"

"If it pokes anything else I really will bleed out," she warned.

Chichiue had dropped down, maneuvering the boulder off her arm. She didn't even flinch, only inhaled deeply before clenching her teeth.

It was awkwardly twisted, clearly broken. Her skin was torn up, the deep gashes barely discernable amongst all the red.

"You can't risk moving her like that," Chichiue added. "Just get her back to the house quickly after taking it out. Your mother at least knows how to bandage her up until we can get a proper surgeon."

Ayame feebly held my hand, "Pull it out from the back," she took a deep breath. "The base of the branch will widen the wound otherwise."

I had no experience with this kind of thing, but I supposed she didn't before she met me either. "Whatever you say," I might have been shaking but I grabbed it anyways, pulling it out as carefully as I could.

It came out easier than I would have thought, and I worried that I

had done it too quickly. Ayame was limp in my arms for a moment.

"Unsympathetic jerk," she managed weakly.

"Just keep it up," I retorted. I shrugged out of my black haori, wrapping it around her before gingerly picking her up.

I hopped out of the hole, trying not to jostle her. She had a hand clamped to the wound, though blood still seeped through. I could feel it against my own skin already. Her right arm lamely hung down and I quickly rested it on her stomach.

"Ayame-nee-chan!" Emi cried. Everything after that was jumbled together incoherently. Oka-san hugged her tightly, her lips pressed to the top of Emi's head.

"Are you okay?" Ayame inquired distantly. Her skin was almost bleached of color, except for the frightening purple tint.

"I'm so sorry!" she wailed.

Ayame smiled and closed her eyes. After a long moment she opened them.

"Stay awake," I instructed.

"I thought I was already dreaming,"

I shook my head, not daring to laugh. I realized I hadn't changed back throughout the whole time and allowed the transformation to fade away. Ayame was probably getting the last of her strength from hers. A cut on her cheek slowly meshed itself back together.

There was no time to waste anymore; she wouldn't last if I just stood around here.

She was bleeding so much.

"Hurry up," I threw over my shoulder.

I wondered who had the worse wound now, myself or Ayame?

* * *

><p>That night, the house was taken by a suffocating silence.<p>

I sat in my room, back stiffly against the wall. I'd seen death many times, been the cause many more times. It wasn't anything new to watch someone I knew or didn't know die.

In my younger years I'd fought side by side with comrades. I hadn't blinked when they died, hadn't cared at all.

It was rightfully different this time and I wished I could somehow rewind today's events. I didn't want to feel this pain in my chest.

I couldn't even sit with her, watch over her as she had for me. I couldn't return the favor.

Chichiue had brought a doctor from Kyoto, a man called Matsumoto. He supposedly had some experience with Oni, as he had been close to Koudou before he died.

I was reluctant to trust a human but there was no one else to ask. Oni didn't often pursue medical sciences. There was no point when we had almost infallible bodies.

Oka-san had come in earlier and updated me on Ayame's condition. She had spoken civilly and considerately.

She wasn't in good shape and she didn't try to mask that. The wound in her side wasn't as bad as it could have been, but still life threatening. Worse still, she had a severe head injury.

I thought this was supposed to be the safest place around? Nothing too dangerous to do, no one too dangerous to break in. Why did she run off on her own like that?

Emi had been standing in front of my door for ten minutes now, working up the nerve to enter or waiting to be invited in.

"Come in," my voice sounded hoarser than I cared to admit.

She slid the shoji screen aside. It was late and she was probably tired. I was; I just couldn't shut my eyes without seeing Ayame's wounds in my head.

"Nii-san," she murmured, wiping her eyes. "It's my fault, isn't it?"

I wanted to say yes, or blame Chiaki . . . blame myself as well. Ayame would have decidedly blamed herself and the avalanche.

I sighed, "It's not your fault."

She fell to her knees, bawling. "But, but! If I hadn't been so stupid, none of this would have happened!"

I stood, making my way over to her to pat her back.

"You can't change what you did, and you shouldn't regret it either. You could have died but Ayame saved you. She saved your life so you just have to thank her when she's feeling better."

She continued to wail and I picked her up, bringing her back to her room.

Emi must have been so afraid, more than anyone else. She was on that mountain when the avalanche happened, unable to get away in time. She thought for sure she should have been the only one to be caught up in it and then, out of nowhere, Ayame had appeared.

She shouldn't have felt responsible for the decision Ayame had made on her own. Ayame sure as hell didn't regret it.

* * *

><p>Please review :D I finished this chapter extra early in

the week :D

****But gosh, this was a stressful chapter x.x there are only so many times you can use snow, blood, and red x.x****

****April 4th, 2012****

****Chapter 25: Yukiona and the gods.****

****Let the Hime's past be revealed! ****

****Also, I have the schedule for every chapter til the very end now :D if you want it just ask and I'll post it next week.****

26. Yukiona and the gods

****Thanks for reviewing, Esvisionik! I couldn't give you this chapter early x.x sorry, I have it all planned out so that the last chapter is posted on May 14th :D glad you liked the chapter :)****

****Thank you, EverRose808~ you could say the Beni-hime is sulking. Ayame hasn't exactly been fair to her XD The schedule is at the bottom, though I'm not revealing all the chapter names since they spoil it x.x****

****XD Whimisicott, you are a funny person. Glad you liked this chapter!****

****Thanks, SilverStarlightXD~ I'm happy you still find the time to review! I think I'd make up OCs for the other guys as well, rather than giving them Chizuru XD as for Emi, Chiaki took something or another from her and told her to prove she was worthy of it. She probably figured climbing a mountain made her worthy :l silly thing. ****

****OWO xXkashikuXx, that's a lot of reviews :D I love you! Thanks for reviewing and adding me and my story to your favorites and what not! I'm glad I could convince you of Kazama's awesomeness :D you have no idea how big my eyes got when I checked my email and found all your reviews! Thank you and thank you again, many times over!****

****Thanks to desirae668! Thank you for being one of my loyal reviewers! I will finish this, don't worry :D you won't have to tape me to a chair. Save your duct tape and take over the world with it XD****

****Haha XD I thought you weren't going to review this week, silentxangel D: I missed you! Thanks for reviewing. As for seasons, it was just Ayame and Kazama remarking on the change in time. The story started in summer and now it has changed to winter, that's all :) I was a bit repetitive but I just wanted to show Kazama's take on how long she'd been there and how she'd changed. Yeah, the Kazama are still drawing a blank on Ayame's true nature but they don't mind; they're all secretly hoping for a marriage XD Emi's voiced her opinion aloud already though :D****

****The Beni-hime is actually pretty secret. The Northern Oni had a brush with her but they didn't link it to her Oni lineage, rather to her nature as the Tengu's Oni, or Oni of the Tengu's Mountain. The**

Southern Oni have kept disconnected from the rest of the Oni in order to hide her, though they haven't been able to locate her in a while. And yup, that was the first time the Kazama saw her transformation and they were only able to glimpse for a moment thanks to her haste.**

XD you must have been all week writing such a long review! Thank you again and I'm happy the last chapter was enough to keep you on the edge of your seat!

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 25: Yukiona and the gods.

I was so cold, numb even, but the pain still found its way around. Every part of my body hurt, inside out. I just wanted to be put down.

Of course, that wouldn't have helped me any and Kazama wasn't about to let me go. He held me protectively to his chest, being very careful not to aggravate my wounds. He was doing a better job than I had.

"Seaweed Head?"

With strained effort, I opened my eyes. My arm resting on my stomach was enough to make me want to close them again. I couldn't even twitch my fingers and I feared I had lost the ability to move it, permanently.

"We're almost there, just stay awake for a while longer."

I could hear his heart beating loudly in my ear. He was worrying over me and I felt guilty. When I had rescued him I had almost been indifferent. Rescuing him had just been a means to make my boring life more interesting.

"Open your eyes, please,"

I hadn't noticed I'd even closed them and fought to open them again. It felt like I hadn't slept in weeks. I stared at his neck, tracing the line of his jaw to keep myself preoccupied. I was losing so much blood; it was amazing I hadn't passed out yet.

The sound of his footfalls changed and I figured we were on the decking outside already. A sliding door opened and he must have done it with his foot. His hold on me hadn't changed at all.

It was probably my room. Otherwise he wouldn't have been able to immediately put me down on a futon. I'd left mine out this morning, even if it risked getting yelled at by Ami-san.

Oh, damn. She'd chew me out for getting blood everywhere.

"Oi, Seaweed Head!"

"Loud," I murmured. My tongue felt thick in my mouth.

"You weren't listening,"

I swallowed, trying to dispel the heavy iron taste.

There were rushed footsteps outside the room. I suddenly realized Kazama was the one clamping the wound now, his huge hands wrapped around my side.

I managed to move my good arm to his hand, laying it across his knuckles. He trembled ever so slightly.

I gave up my sight, I wasn't going to be able to stay conscious for much longer. I could barely see anyways, just a dark tunnel and blurry images.

"Chikage, everything will be alright, your father is on his way to Kyoto to find a doctor." Ami-san was speaking so much . . . nicer. "I will take care of her until then,"

"Oka-san," Kazama responded, not sure what else to say.

"Leave, I have had my fair share of treating wounds thanks to your father's reckless years."

Hands were traded and I let mine fall to my side, unable to muster the strength to keep it up.

* * *

><p>I was barely aware that I had even blacked out until I was awake again, staring up at the ceiling as it spun round and round. I wanted to lift my head but it was simply too heavy.<p>

"Ayame, Ayame?"

I tried to respond or at least meet her eyes. Ami-san was so impatient sometimes.

"By the gods, what happened to the poor girl?" the voice belonged to an unfamiliar man. His rough hands urgently appraised my side.

"There was an avalanche," Ami replied pointedly. He must have been a human.

His hands left my side for a moment and he gently lifted my head. I cried out as he checked the wound.

"That's quite severe," he observed. "I'm surprised she's even conscious,"

"We are built stronger than humans," Ami countered.

"That doesn't mean anything when it concerns such delicate organs!" he scolded. He had my respect. I hadn't been able to get a word against her since I had arrived.

Ami-san stood and stomped away. "I will leave her in your capable hands then."

Warm breath breezed over my cheeks, "It's alright; you don't have to be strong anymore. I'll take care of you,"

* * *

><p>What did he mean?<p>

There were so many times when I should have been strong, but wasn't. I had failed over and over again.

I had killed twenty-three people because I hadn't been able to stop the blood thirsty part of me. Gorou-oji-san died because I hadn't been there to protect him. He was only a human and I had let him take over my duty of protecting the mountain.

I was so pathetic. I couldn't protect anyone without the Beni-hime and even then I ran the chance of hurting them because of it. I was just a double edged blade.

What was I supposed to do? I'd been training every morning since late summer, trying to tame the Beni-hime, trying to force her under my thumb. All that time and I could still only command her for thirty-four seconds. Any longer and I risked her taking over.

Why was I so incompetent? How did I expect to become the leader of the Agano when I couldn't even rescue one person without nearly dying?

I looked around curiously. Maybe I was already dead.

"Poor child. You have tried to take everything onto your own shoulders,"

I spun on my heels, staring eye to eye with a blindingly white woman. Everything about her was white; her hair, her skin, her clothes, except her eyes.

They were the purest blue eyes I had ever seen. It almost looked like they had been cut from the sky on a clear, cold, day.

"The weight of this world will crush you if you stand alone,"

I took a startled step back. Her presence was almost frightening. There was something very ancient about her, but vaguely familiar as well.

"There are people who are willing to share the burden, people who want to help you," she gazed at me levelly, piercing blue eyes boring through my very soul. It felt like she knew everything about me, though she had hardly said anything to imply that.

I still had a nagging feeling that I should have known her too. I blushed, embarrassed that I was unable to recall her name. It was like forgetting someone you knew from your childhood and then meeting them again. They still remembered you but you couldn't even recall what their name was.

She didn't say anything else, as though waiting for me to call her name.

Her eyes really were the bluest I'd ever seen, and I was sure I had seen something similar recently.

Agano Ryuji's tapestry. Amongst all the earthy tones there'd been his blue eyes. They were the sign of demon blood in the Agano household. Rokurou was the last to have blue eyes.

I gasped. "I'm very sorry!" and promptly bowed. There were a number of shadows watching from afar now.

Why hadn't I thought it strange? I was in a huge, empty space with just myself and one mysterious woman. This must have been a spirit realm or something.

"Um, excuse me, but why am I here, Yukiona-sama?" I felt even dumber now, not knowing what to call her. The name of the Yukiona who gave birth to Agano Ryuji, the founder, had never been mentioned.

"I do not have much time to enlighten you, but I can spare a few words. It has much to do with the crisis your physical body is currently facing,"

I glanced down at my hands, finding them slightly translucent.

"The connection between your body and your soul is weak," she gestured around. "We have all decided to take advantage of this and show you the truth of the past."

I didn't understand any of this, only that I was technically just a soul right now. I lifted my right hand to pinch my cheek, but felt no pain. My right arm shouldn't have been able to move anyways.

A small smile pulled at her lips and I wondered if she found someone so young and alive (sort of) amusing.

Something floated by in the corner of my eye and I turned to face it quickly.

Another transparent figure waltzed right through the Yukiona, her red hair fanning out behind her. She looked over her shoulder, porcelain white mask betraying no emotion. The mask sported spiny goat horns, curling around her pointed ears.

She was a peculiar sight, wearing a sleeveless haori and leather leggings. It was as though it were just to show off the red spirals on her shoulders and her long, slim legs.

A bodiless voice rang through the air, neither clearly male nor female.

"You who host our fallen sister must learn of her tragic past."

The scenery abruptly changed, a fog settling, and I panicked. I thought the gods were normally kind enough to guide you through this sort of thing?

A harsh wind blew and the heavy mist rolled away, hard rain pelting me.

It was a grey afternoon, cold even. A small but brightly decorated

shrine caught my eye. How could it have not? I was standing right in front of it, almost. Red maples surrounded it, a bold guard.

I looked down the path, wondering if I should be going somewhere else.

This place couldn't be more obvious. I could hardly believe it had any connection at all to the current Beni-hime. I guessed this was where she got her flashy name from.

I sighed. So she was a land god, like my sister? Nee-san had a long ways to go if she even wanted to compare to the Hime.

Then again, Nee-san was of the living variety. The Beni-hime was purely a spiritual form. It'd only make sense for her to be many times more powerful without a weak body holding her down.

I moved closer to the shrine, standing under its eaves, affording myself some protection from the wind and rain.

Someone else had the same idea, hurrying up the steep path.

He held a fat leaf over his head, warding the downpour away. He looked so pitiful that I almost laughed. It wasn't like he would hear me. I was merely watching a scene from the past.

He clapped his hands twice, gazing at the shrine with an admiring look in his red eyes. His dark hair had the barest hint of green in it.

I was probably watching one of my ancestors. It was an interesting experience. I'd always thought of the Kurosawa as being rich and royal, not dirt poor and out in the cold.

He stood under the eaves next to me, paying me no mind. He rubbed his hands together and breathed into them. It was cold enough to see his breath.

Guiltily, he faced the door, sliding it open. "Sorry, Princess of the Red Maples, I'm borrowing your hospitality."

I followed him in. The shrine was only built for outwards appearance; the inside was just a single small room.

The Kurosawa Oni lid down and fell asleep in just a few moments. He must have been travelling for quite a while.

A moment later the door rattled and I peered at it curiously.

The same girl from earlier materialized, phasing through the door. Beni-hime in her younger days.

She shook her fists at him, mask jiggling. "You can't just enter my shrine, you stupid pig!"

He hadn't stirred at all. I was right when I had assumed she was of the non-living kind. I normally wouldn't have been able to see something like her but normal didn't really apply to this situation.

She relaxed and knelt next to him, brushing her hand across his hair. Like the door, it moved slightly in response. The Beni-hime must have been quite powerful at this time, less than she was now though.

I was bewildered when she started to hum softly, still stroking his head. I unexpectedly felt sorry for her. She clearly had strong emotions for him, despite shaking her fists at him. I wondered what it must be like, unable to even touch or speak to the one you love.

My chest tightened. It was unbelievably bittersweet. Was this really the same Beni-hime who wanted to pluck Kazama's eyes out?

The stage melted away, a humid wind sending me tumbling, hot sand whipping about.

When the dust settled I was again in front of the shrine.

It couldn't have been more different. The once cheerful shrine was burnt to the ground, only a single post standing. The lush greenery of a mountain had been removed, a single red maple the sole survivor.

It was disturbing, I had no idea what happened here. War? Drought? Some other disaster?

There was a rustling and I defensively twisted towards the source.

It was the same Oni from the last time, only years older. Worry lines creased his once bright eyes and lips; grey streaked his dark hair. His gaze was old and weary.

He stood in front of the last red maple, caressing the branches.

"Poor, little, red maple. You're all alone now, just like me. I wonder if that means we're together, not alone?"

The Hime appeared, almost completely transparent. The land, her source of power, was ruined and she had nothing more to draw on than a tiny tree. She reached a trembling hand out to run through his hair but reached straight through his head instead.

"Say, Beni-hime, do you have strength enough to grant me one last wish?" he muttered to himself, completely unaware that the Hime was listening to him intently.

"I'll give you anything!" she exclaimed, "Whatever it is, tell me now! Before I disappear . . ." there was an abysmal despair in her voice.

I bit my lip. If only she had disappeared.

Two Oni skidded to a stop behind him and the Beni-hime sobbed, throwing herself in front of them, waving her arms.

"Kurosawa-sama," one accosted, his voice tight and formal.

"So you've come at last," the Kurosawa Oni spoke quietly. "Traitors,"

he spat.

"Kazuouki! Run!" she screamed, hoping her voice would somehow reach him.

He faced them and they drew their swords, lips drawn.

"Forgive us," the other, younger, Oni pleaded.

Kazuouki smiled melancholically.

I swallowed. He had a sword, why didn't he fight back?

The Beni-hime collapsed, bawling loudly. "Kazuouki! Kazuouki! Why won't you run? Why won't you save yourself? You haven't done anything wrong!"

The two Oni cautiously approached him but their alertness was unnecessary. Kazuouki was resigned. There was no fight left in him.

They charged, swords piercing his chest in a flash. The smile didn't leave his lips as his eyes languished shut and his breath ceased, life leaving his tired body. He was dead before they even removed their blades.

They backed away, letting him drop ungracefully in a heap. Death was anything but graceful, I already knew that.

The Beni-hime was quiet, ignoring the men as they walked through her, pseudo teleporting away from their deed. She hauled herself to him, a shaky hand trembling over his pale cheek.

"Kazuouki?" she whimpered. "You died?"

Despite being a spirit she must have been quite naïve, unable to comprehend the death of a living creature.

She howled, mask cracking but not breaking away. Her transparent form darkened until she was as solid as a flesh and bones being. A shiver ran down my spine.

Was this what the gods had meant? Their 'fallen' sister?

The Beni-hime hadn't been a goddess, just a simple spirit dwelling in the land. She'd been about to disappear and then her yearning for an Oni had turned to hatred and rage as he died.

She wasn't a god, she wasn't even a demon. She was a vengeful spirit, a mononoke.

A saltwater wave plowed into me, dragging me under, twirling through dark depths.

I washed ashore, beach sand clinging to me. I sat up, sputtering.

Where was I now?

"You are the Beni-hime of the Iron Mountains?"

I bounced back onto my feet.

A woman with inky black hair stood on the grassy hill overlooking the beach. She wore many elegant robes, hiding her petite frame. Her eyes were shut, discharge gathered in the corners. She was blind.

Even so, she was angled directly at the Beni-hime who lazily sprawled across a rock on the beach. Without turning to address her she answered.

"You can see me?"

"No no," she giggled. "I cannot see,"

The Hime rolled over and I gasped. Her mask was gone, revealing chaotic crimson eyes and a sinfully beautiful face. Her horns were gone, angry red dots left in their place on her forehead.

Her hair was a mess and her robes were covered in blood. The spiral tattoos on her shoulders had become jagged and there were tears in her leggings.

"How then?" she inquired plainly, uninterestedly.

"Your aura is quite terrifying," she explained. She might have said that but she didn't appear the least bit afraid. I got the feeling that she had come to the Hime for a reason and couldn't afford to be frightened away.

"Oni child, what is it you want from me?"

I examined her again, seeing no hint of Oni in her. She was weak and frail looking. I'd never seen a blind Oni before either.

"My fiancÃ© wishes to annul our engagement, because I am weak." She cracked her sealed eyes open, once red but now pink from cloudy cataracts. "I am the last of the Kurosawa Oni and if I cannot have a husband to marry into my line I will have failed all my ancestors."

The conviction was there in her voice. She might have been physically inept but her mind was strong and daring.

"I was told by my grandfather to seek you out, the Rakshasi who ate his great-grandfather's flesh."

The Beni-hime cackled. "I haven't eaten the flesh of an Oni before. Only humans," she picked her teeth and I wondered if she had recently. I felt like throwing up.

The young woman sighed, disappointed. I couldn't fathom what she had been hoping for.

Swiftly, the Hime stood and bounded across the sand to where she stood. She placed her clawed hands on her shoulders and the Oni gasped.

They tumbled to the ground and I sprinted over, thinking the Beni-hime was going to eat her or something.

"Maybe I'll eat you,"

I paled. This was the Beni-hime I was used to.

She didn't utter a sound, only flinched away.

"But, you mentioned you were a Kurosawa Oni," the Hime drawled. "I vaguely remember someone by the name of Kazuouki . . . he was a Kurosawa Oni,"

"Kazuouki?" she asked. She probably didn't know who the Hime was talking about. Oni names were something old and rare, a silly tradition by now. I thought Kazama was referring to Hijikata jestingly for a while, before I figured out he supported the old ways.

"Yes, I can smell his scent faintly in you," she palmed the girl's cheek. "Let me help you, I'll make you strong,"

"Hâ€"how?"

The Hime bit her wrist, blood gushing. "Drink my blood," and she offered the elixir to the last Kurosawa Oni.

She hesitated, but only for a moment, fumbling for her chance. The blood touched her lips and she greedily gulped.

Offhandedly, the Beni-hime warned her. "You and your descendants will never be rid of me. As long as this blood contract remains, I will not die."

She paid her no mind. Already her eyes were clearing, a healthy glow lighting her skin.

Beni-hime's eyes closed and her form became ghostly. "Don't regret it," she grinned before sinking into the Kurosawa Oni's body.

She writhed, screaming in agony. She was the first host; no doubt she had to grow accustomed to the Beni-hime's torrential power. Sometime ago, while training before daybreak, I had learned that she was poisonous. It was more potent than divine silver, more potent than anything else.

"She was more alone than any of us. But, to this day, she is the one closest to mortals."

I blinked and found myself standing next to the Yukiona.

"The Beni-hime went insane," I observed.

"Such is the price of absolute power,"

"Will I go insane?"

"Only if you are unable to change," the Yukiona provided. "Balance the karma and right the past." She held my temples, bringing me closer to her icy breath. "Good luck," and she gently planted a kiss on the top of my head.

* * *

><p>Please review :D currently 198 pages in the document X3 size 12 font, arial, no spaces after each paragraph (indention though), 1.15 line spacing. The next chapter will push the total over 200 XD

I wished I could have written this chapter better. I wanted the part where Kazuouki dies to be more moving, since I ended up crying when I did out the first draft. But alas, I can't translate everything in my brain to words T.T

April 6th, **Chapter 26: The price of life.**

April 11th, **Chapter 27: Visitors from the North.**

April 14th, **Chapter 28:**

April 18th, **Chapter 29:**

April 25th, **Chapter 30: In a name.**

May 2nd, **Chapter 31: What makes a home.**

May 9th, **Chapter 32:**

May 14th, **Chapter 33:**

27. The price of life

Please review :D Happy Easter, everybody!

X.X I hate this chapter T.T Kazama became so girly.

Thanks for the quick review, Esvisionik! You may bounce in your seat but you'll just wear yourself out x.x hopefully not enough to keep you from reviewing :D thanks for reviewing again and I'm glad the last chapter pleased you!

Thanks for the ultra long review, silentxangel! A couple of people have been addressing me as Phantom now^^ makes me feel cool :D I'm glad I was able to pull a fast one with the Beni-hime! It's not important how her shrine was destroyed, just that the land and her shrine being destroyed meant she no longer had a medium through which to host her power. You could say her container was broken and her soul began to bleed out. The fact that she was able to continue existing proves just how amazing her love and sorrow was for Kazuouki.

Yukiona literally means snow woman, yup. Yukiona is also a type of Japanese demon, as are Oni, Tengu, Kitsune, Tanuki, Inugami, Bakeneko, Nekomata, Kappa, and white snakes (a sign of good fortune but I forget what their Japanese name is XD). There are a ton of other demons I didn't get a chance to mention x.x I love Japanese mythology :D

**More or less, Kazuouki's death was the result of a power struggle within the Kurosawa Oni family and that's about it. Poor guy :(I wanted to do more on the Beni-hime and him but I feel like I'd be

going too far off track. The how just isn't that important): I hope this chapter isn't too disappointing D:**

**xXkashikuXx, I'm glad you're adding so many reviews to my story! Thank you so much :D I'm happy you like my characters and found certain moments funny, it makes me feel like I've done a good job when someone reviews =w= I love that I was able to bring you over to the Kazama side XD and you were also able to see that Hinata does care for her sister a lot! **

As for the game, I haven't actually played it D: I just watched videos through youtube and read the reviews for his route T.T I wish I could play the game but I can't read kanji. It's easy enough to search it up online, you just have to have a decent comprehension of spoken Japanese. It helps that Kazama's seiyuu speaks really slowly!

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 26: The price of life.

Four days had come and gone. Ayame was still unconscious and Dr. Matsumoto had left, insisting there was nothing else he could do for her.

"Whether she wakes up or not is up to her, head injuries are like that."

Most of her injuries weren't even that bad anymore. The various scratches and bruises had already disappeared, leaving just the hole in her side. It was mostly sealed, though nowhere near healed.

Her arm was banged up pretty good. Matsumoto had reportedly felt several breaks and her elbow was apparently shattered. It took a lot to break an Oni's bones; I'd only done it once before.

All the same, it looked alright to me. I wasn't about to test that though. The doctor had done a superb job bandaging her arm, splinting and plastering it with a smelly paste that kept her arm from bending before it had time to mend.

Not like it mattered. She'd been entirely still since she went under.

Everyone was taking turns sitting with her. Emi begged to sleep in the same room and Oka-san let her, even though we knew she was next to her all night long, awake.

I padded down the hall towards Ayame's room early in the morning. My turn was first thing in the day and that meant I had to persuade Emi to go back to her own room and sleep.

Emi sat stiffly on her knees, hands folded, shoulders hunched. I tapped her on the head and she jerked. Her hair was as messy as Ayame's had been before she came here.

"Go to bed, I'll watch over her for you."

She stifled a yawn. "You'll tell me when she wakes up?"

"Of course," we both were saying 'when', though Chiaki and even Chiharu were saying 'if'. Oka-san and Chichiue avoided having to say it at all to keep from picking sides.

There were dark circles under her eyes, almost as bad as Ayame's when I first met her. She slouched away, closing the door behind her with exaggerated slowness.

Everything was reminding me of Ayame. It didn't matter where or what, I ended up comparing it to something Ayame had said or done. I was driving myself crazy.

The wind blew and I listened carefully, searching for the sounds of approach. Emi was out of earshot and I knelt next to Ayame, adjusting the blankets around her arms. The dark blue comforter Oka-san had brought in for her made her skin look even paler.

I checked her temperature. She had been terribly cold the first day but by now it had somewhat returned to normal.

It was absolutely quiet. The sun had only just risen and everyone else was probably still in bed. Winters were long here with absolutely nothing to do to pass the time. It was easy to sleep in and just forget about everything else.

I gently held her good hand, pulling it out from underneath the thick blanket. Her hand was freezing and I told myself I would just warm it up for a bit.

Flipping her palm upwards I traced the lines with one finger. I was hoping she would find it as irritating as I did and wake up. She was extremely ticklish. I had thoroughly enjoyed tickling her before her fever had worsened during my stay at her home.

She was such an idiot. She never told anybody anything, whether she was in pain or about to do something stupid. I'd never, ever, let the dunce out of my sight again. She was too blockheaded for her own good, for her own safety.

Who in the hell tried to stop an enormous tree with their head anyways? That was absolutely brilliant on her part.

Her fingers hadn't even twitched and I reluctantly returned her arm to her side, guiltily holding on for a long second more. Under normal circumstances she wouldn't have let me hold her hand for any length of time, not without a fight. I'd only gotten lucky during the fireworks in Gion.

What a dolt. When she woke up I'd make myself clear. She'd probably think I was joking or call me a pervert, but I'd definitely find a way to make her understand. I didn't care if I had to kiss her in front of my parents.

That might have been going too far. Oka-san would forever be lecturing me on indecency. I would kiss her though. I was through with being subtle.

Once said, aloud or otherwise, it was impossible to get the thought

out of my head. There she lay, a shaku and a half away, completely oblivious to the change in my feelings.

It's not like she would notice if I stole her lips now, though she wouldn't thank me for it if she ever found out. There was also something unsettling about kissing someone who was in a coma.

I wished she'd just hurry up and wake up already. How long was she going to sleep it off?

"_She might be . . . different when she wakes up,"_

Was she still prone to memory loss, even though that had been something induced by the Tengu? I cracked my knuckles and sat cross legged.

I wondered if she could swallow like that. If she could, a little blood might go a long way. She had undergone major improvement last time she had drank my blood. There was a good chance it would work again.

Outside, heavy snow fell, skittering across the deck. Her two Imperial Chrysanthemums were resting at her side and I picked up the original. I drew it halfway, paranoid that the metallic click would somehow be heard. Before I could reconsider my plan I pressed the fleshy part of my thumb to the blade.

The slice was knitting itself back together in a few seconds and I quickly parted her mouth with my index finger, letting the blood spill over her ashen lips.

The response I had been hoping for failed to come about. Her eyes remained shut and she didn't so much as twitch.

I licked the blood off my palm and wrist, disappointed that it had no effect. I guessed it was back to waiting for me.

I dabbed at the blood left on her lips but the bright stain wouldn't so easily lift from her color drained skin.

There wasn't a bucket of water or even a cloth to be found and I considered wetting my thumb with spit, something human commoners often did for their young. The very thought repulsed me.

At least I had a legitimate reason to kiss her now. Oka-san would probably attempt to strangle me if she noticed blood on Ayame's lips and had some type of proof it wasn't hers.

I leaned down, lips hovering a short breath away. This was worse than letting the Beni-hime bite me again. I was kind of glad she'd never know the difference.

I brushed her mouth softly, the sensation satisfying a faint buzzing in my ears. An exhaled breath caught my attention and I grudgingly backed off.

Ayame's chest rose and fell visibly, more pronounced than it had been the past few days. Her eyes wrinkled and she tweaked her nose. She tried to move, her body incontinent after being immobile for so long.

Her eyes snapped open, glancing about quickly.

"Good morning, Seaweed Head," I knew kissing her was a good idea. Even in a deep slumber she was able to deflect my romantic advances.

She squinted at me, trying to raise her head up. She moaned and set it back on her pillow. "I feel like a squashed frog," she rasped.

It was possible she had missed the kiss and I wasn't sure how I felt about that. For a moment, though she'd been unconscious, I'd felt closer to her than she ever let me be. I was glad she was awake, it just hadn't sunk in yet and I regretted the kiss being so short.

I contemplated letting her off for now and revisiting the matter of making my feelings clear to her at a later date. She had just woken up from a three day coma.

"How's your head?" I inquired.

"Not that again," she grumbled, struggling to cover her eyes with her good arm.

I remembered asking her that a couple times while she had her fever. I was impressed she still remembered and that she even felt irritated by it.

"How are you, then?" she was as spiteful as she usually was. Actually, this was the most she'd been in a while.

She dropped her arm, feeling her side. "Not bad, considering what happened . . ." she went quiet after she flicked her tongue over her chapped lips.

"I forgot you have a questionably strong sense of smell," I remarked. "Does it apply to taste as well?" she had told me not to ask last time I questioned her on how I tasted.

She jolted, straining to sit upright. Her right arm shifted and she froze before sinking back into the futon, tears in her eyes. "Itai," she groaned between gritted teeth.

I casually bent over her, fixing her dark hair back behind her ears. She cautiously returned my gaze, no doubt wondering just what the hell I was up to. I didn't really have a plan.

"Chi~" "Kazama, what are you doing?"

I smirked. It was advantageous for me that she was still disoriented; it'd be easy to talk circles around her. "What were you about to call me?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and I had to wonder what her thoughts were right then. Was she wishing she had stayed unconscious? She raised her arm, pushing me away.

It was pitiful how depleted her strength was and I captured her frail hand, massaging her clammy palm with my thumb.

"Kazama, you're being cruel," she looked like she meant it. Her eyelashes trembled, tears pooled in her golden eyes. I hadn't prepared for that reaction.

"So are you."

She gasped, as though I had surprised her with my serious tone of voice and fixed stare.

"You are a hypocrite," I informed her. "You think it is okay to just save my life, weasel your way into my life, and then almost disappear from _my life_?"

She blinked hard, opening that big mouth of hers to say something back.

I was having none of it. No defenses, no clever offenses. Nothing, absolutely nothing, that would lead me off track right now. I clamped my free hand over those flushed lips. Chagrin certainly made her look more energetic and less anemic.

"You won't let me give you the same chance you gave me," I growled. "How long must I wait before you realize what I'm trying to offer you?"

I kept her speech locked away, waiting for some kind of recognition to light her eyes. She wasn't completely stunned; she should have at least been able to add up all the little things.

If she even dared accuse me of joking around . . .

The tears finally spilled over and I sighed. I didn't mean to actually make her cry. Unwillingly, I removed my hand. Every righteous man out there was weak to a woman's tears.

"Why are you crying?" I asked, hoping to delay her verbal assault for a couple seconds longer.

She hiccupped, unable to wipe her eyes because I held her only capable hand. I caressed the tears away, partly as an apology, partly to show I wasn't letting the matter drop.

"I feel like everyone expects something from me," she sobbed. "I don't know what to do anymore! I can't do anything!"

I'd thought for a long time that she didn't easily let her anxieties show. Either she did and I'd assumed wrong or she didn't and I just had the peculiar ability to make her reveal them.

"You idiot, I just want you to be near me," I embraced her tightly, gathering her into my arms, hyperaware of her brokenness. "Let me share your burden," I didn't know exactly what brought on the sudden waterworks, though I doubted it was strictly caused by me.

She took a steadying breath, though she still shook. I thought she was going to try and turn me down but she pressed her forehead to my chest, hiding her tears and the tiny smile I glimpsed.

"You'll get caught up in a couple hundred years worth of bad karma," she warned, sniffing.

I scoffed. "You can't get rid of me now; an Oni never goes back on his word,"

How long had I been waiting for this? Just to hold her and nothing else? No interruptions (for a while) and no hidden motives.

Of course, she awkwardly squirmed, trying to put an arm's length between us. Ayame hadn't seemed like the type who cared for personal space until now.

"Kazama," she sounded exasperated but not as much as I felt. "You canâ€"you can let go of me now,"

"No," she still didn't really get it.

I rested my chin on the top of her head, securing her against my chest, feather lightly stroking her back through her hair.

"But my arm hurts," she complained.

I adjusted my grip and made sure her arm couldn't possibly be hurting because of me. If it was hurting now, it wasn't my fault and she'd have to suck it up.

"Now?"

She didn't reply, only half-heartedly grumbled. She'd probably been hoping I'd just put her down.

"How about your side?"

"It's fine," she admitted, though a second later she was wiggling again.

"Are you uncomfortable?" I teased.

"Yes,"

I chuckled. "You'll get used to it,"

She grew quiet and I had a moment to appreciate the situation. It seemed like all my worrying and planning meant nothing. If I'd known she'd be this accepting I'd have done something long ago.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

I frowned. "What for?"

She deliberated for a moment and I made to peer down at her, though she immediately turned away from my prying eyes.

"Well, firstly, I'm sorry for making you and everyone else worry. How long have I been out?"

"Four days," four really long days. I wrapped my arms around her waist and I swore I felt a shiver go up her spine.

"Secondly . . ."

"Secondly?" I prompted.

She thumped me on the chest with one fist. "You jerk! You kissed me when I wasn't even awake!"

I laughed, carefully prying her away to see her embarrassed face.

"That's not fair," she added with a pout, voice hushed.

"What isn't?" I drawled slowly.

"Um," even her ears were red. "My first kiss," she managed.

I snorted. "First this, first that. What is it with women and their precious first kiss?"

"It's important," she defended.

I could think of lots of things that were more important. "Call me by my first name,"

"Hah? Why?" she challenged.

"Because it's important to me," I justified.

"Oh," she nibbled her bottom lip, her cheeks a pinched pink again. "C-Chikage?"

She probably felt the contented rumble in my chest. It'd been bothering me for a while that she called my brother's by their first names. Well, she called Chiaki 'you', even when Oka-san could hear.

I heard a muted gurgle and Ayame shrank against me.

"That was my stomach,"

I couldn't blame her for ruining the moment. Instead I pulled her closer, loathing letting go.

"I suppose I should go tell Emi you're alright. She'll have everyone up in an instant," Oka-san might actually pamper her for once.

I tucked her back into bed, ruffling her bangs playfully. She seemed to be organizing her thoughts.

"What are you thinking?" it was probably too much to ask, but an honest answer would be nice.

A grin played in her expression before she hauled the thick blue blanket over her head. "Don't ask,"

* * *

><p>Everyone was relieved to see her awake and well. Even Chiaki, though he wouldn't admit it. He felt himself partly responsible for the event.<p>

Chiharu had a load of questions for her, mostly concerning her near

death experience. He wanted to know if she'd had dreams while she was out. I didn't really get why he wanted to know.

Oka-san shut him up after a while, insisting that Ayame needed her rest. She shoed everyone out of the room, except herself. I wasn't the only one who wanted to protest.

I got my chance to keep her company again later in the evening, though Emi tagged along too.

"Ayame-nee-chan, we brought more food!" Emi called as she opened the door.

Ayame propped herself up on one elbow. "More?"

Since she'd said she was hungry Oka-san had brought her enough to feed three grown men. Even Ayame couldn't force all of it down.

Emi giggled. "I'll eat your rice if you want,"

I sat next to the head of Ayame's futon and helped her up despite her pursed lips and partial glare. I detected a hint of a rosy complexion. Truthfully, I was waiting for her to slip up and for someone to catch on.

Emi laid the tray down and Ayame reached for the pickled vegetables. Some things would never change.

"Are you going to bed early tonight, Emi-chan?"

She nodded. Her head was already dipping occasionally.

Ayame smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry for worrying you,"

"It's fine since you're alright now," Emi returned.

They'd already had a cry over this, both of them apologizing and claiming the blame. If it looked like they were going to start again I'd kick Emi out.

"I'm sorry you got hurt so badly,"

Ayame's demeanor was cheerful enough. "It was worth it, I'm glad I could save your life."

"Nee-chan," she breathed, admiring Ayame's selflessness.

I sighed. "Come on you, it's past your bedtime,"

Distracted, she turned on me, scowling with what little energy she had left.

"Nii-san, I already told you, I don't have a bedtime anymore!"

"Yeah, tell that to Oka-san,"

That shut her up.

"Goodnight, Emi-chan."

"Night, Nee-chan," she yawned and I pushed her out the door.

I cleared my throat and edged closer to her. Now that Emi was out of the way I could continue to convince Ayame. She still seemed weary.

She tried to brush me off by lying down, having somehow managed to finish the tray of food already. "Goodnight, Kazama,"

I stole her blanket and sat on it, earning a frustrated curse from Ayame.

"I don't think our relationship has changed at all," she declared. "You're still a pervert and a jerk,"

"Your collar is loose," I taunted.

She blushed and checked, finding it perfectly in order. Her lower lip jutted out stubbornly, denying her own gullibility.

"Liar,"

I snickered. She made it sound as though it was the worst sin I'd committed thus far.

"How about I tell you the truth?"

That ignited her curiosity. She moved to sit up again and I dragged her onto my lap. I grazed her cheek with the tip of my nose and she bared her neck, probably unintentionally. She had goose bumps.

"I was afraid,"

She remained stationary, unable to utter a word back. I took it as my chance to sort out my miscommunications.

"I was afraid of you rejecting me if I tried too hard," I could feel my own breath bouncing back from the crook of her shoulder and yearned to tickle her with an airy peck.

I murmured into her ear instead, drawing a barely audible intake from her.

"But, I don't care anymore, my time with you is too precious." I had come to realize the value of every moment I could spend with her after she had nearly died.

"Chikage," she started, unsurely. "I'm sorry for making you wait," tentatively she added, "I should have listened to everyone."

I rocked back, shooting her a puzzled look. "Everyone?"

She examined the wall, avoiding my eyes blatantly. "Osen, Satomi from Agano, your sister, your oldest brother . . . your mother,"

Why didn't she believe them? I could maybe understand if it had just been one person, but five? How dense was she?

"Why didn't you believe them?"

"I don't know," she whined. She was still recovering; I was astonished she could last this long without yawning. "I guess I just didn't want to make any assumptions,"

"Weren't there plenty of times I made my interests clear?" I could distinctly recall several occasions where we both flirted. Maybe I had been and she was just going with the flow.

"I don't know. There were plenty of times when I couldn't tell,"

"Let me be clear then," I snared her lips before she could look away, muffling a startled yelp.

Ayame thawed, her clenched hand relaxing against my forearm. I noted that her lips were no longer dry from dehydration.

She clumsily kissed back and I grinned against her plump lips.

"Don't laugh," she mumbled as she tilted her head away. I trailed a line of kisses from her jaw to her shoulder, thrilled that she was allowing me to.

I swaddled her in the blanket and returned her to her futon. I had to slow down, for both our sakes.

"Unfortunately, I cannot stay for any longer without making more observant people suspicious." I shrugged. "My nosey family would hover if they knew the difference. Not that I would mind,"

"I better get well soon," she didn't like the idea any more than I did.

* * *

><p>Please review x.x

I don't know who's more out of character, Ayame or Kazama? I feel like Ayame should have protested or denied it more but I wasn't writing from her POV and I didn't feel as close to her as normal. On the other hand, I don't have a clue what I was doing with Kazama ^^;

April 11th

Chapter 27: Visitors from the North.

28. Visitors from the North

Please review! I love you guys :D

Dang, you are fast! Thanks for the review, EverRose808! I found the last chapter just a bit disappointing D: I hope you didn't mind too much.

**Second place goes to SilverStarlightXD! Thanks for the review! I'm glad you thought the last chapter was good anyways! I love the cute

faces you used in your review :D**

Thanks for your review, Whimsicott! I really appreciated it! How could you reject Kazama anyways? I'd say yes even if he was back to being an arrogant, haughty, jerk who thinks he can do no wrong :D as for writer's block, just pretend there is no such thing. It's easier to ignore when you set a schedule and think of it as a job as well as a hobby ^^ it helps when you get a couple loyal reviewers too!

Thanks for the review, silentxangel! You always make my insecurities disappear :D thank you! I agree that both Ayame and Chikage went about things the wrong way. Chikage wasn't being assertive enough and gave Ayame a reasonable doubt about his intentions, at first! The rest was Ayame being an idiot XD it's also her first time in such a scenario and she probably wanted to cling to the friendship part of the relationship, not realizing she'd still have that part should it change :)

XD it was like Sleeping Beauty, only in this case it wasn't the kiss. It was the blood, the effect was just delayed enough to give Chikage time to fantasize XD e.e that or she really can deflect all romantic advances -even when unconscious-!

Thank you, desirae668 =w= Cadbury Cream Eggs =w= Chikage should have realized sooner that he wouldn't get rejected. It's Ayame for God's sake, she's dumb as a brick but she definitely has been attracted to him since the get-go l : on the other hand his advances were pretty funny before now. I loved the part where they were going to the Demon Bone Yard and he asked her about her new tattoo. Of course, she wasn't going to tell him (or show him!) and he told her to sleep with one eye open XD good times :)

**Haha, thanks for reviewing again, Arcee-chan! I know you're still loyally reading and I can settle for that, but it's still nice to be reassured of your presence by a review :D I'm glad you and everyone else seems to think they were still within range (: I feel like I could have done a better job on the last few chapters but I'm still lacking in some regards :(**

**Thank you, new reviewer! I really appreciate your compliments, Juliedoo! Hopefully I can continue being worthy of such praise
^^**

Thank you, everyone!

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 27: Visitors from the North.

I thought it was crazy how much one incident could change my life. I didn't even know what I had to do anymore.

There was time for me to figure it out though. My wounds were pretty bad. I'd have to rest for two or three days more just to make sure I didn't tear the hole in my side open. I wouldn't be able to practice the sword for even longer, since broken bones took a little while to recover from.

Strangely enough, my head was completely fine. There was no sign that I'd almost cracked my skull open and I suspected it had something to do with the Yukiona.

I hadn't mentioned the strange vision yet. Chiharu asked but I hadn't had the time to answer him. I was still trying to find a chance to talk to Chikage about it but his mother hovered whenever she could. It seemed like she had Emi take her place when she couldn't.

My opportunity to share the information with Kazama, Chikage, came on the fourth day. I could finally get up without Ami-san chasing after me.

I was sitting on the deck, watching fluffy white snow gather on the already packed down layer. My arm ached.

Earlier I had damaged the plaster while trying to scratch my arm underneath the cast and then tore it away in frustration. Ami-san walked in at that exact moment and scolded me for a half hour afterwards. She did make me a sling when she was done though.

Chikage appeared around the corner, his thoughtful pursed lips immediately smoothing out. He glanced around once and then sauntered over, sitting behind me.

He balanced his chin on my shoulder and huffed, his breath tickling the side of my neck. "Oka-san is too sharp,"

"Does she disapprove?" I couldn't really tell what her reasons were.

"I don't think so," he weaved his arms around my stomach. "She's probably on your side,"

"Hah? Why?" she was doing a pretty good job of hiding it.

"She probably thinks I did something to make you nervous since you avoid looking at me," he replied, his voice just slightly irritated. He didn't sound so sure either.

I leaned against him, trying to convey an apology and a reassurance. My tongue was tied in too many knots to speak right at the moment.

"I was worried I'd blush or gawk at you or something,"

His chest vibrated from a quiet rumble. "Either way, everyone seems to have noticed something."

I hung my head. "I'm too easy to read,"

"That's not a bad thing," he paused to comb my loose hair over one shoulder. "You're honest and true to your goals, no one will find fault in that."

Uwah, cold shivers. Did he have to speak right next to my ear? My whole head was buzzing; a snowflake would probably sizzle if it hit my cheek.

His brushed his lips across the side of my neck and I almost elbowed him. It wasn't so unbearably ticklish after awhile.

"Um," I was supposed to be asking him something but it wasn't forming in my mind, probably because he was nibbling the outer shell of my ear. "I used to have that pierced,"

"Why?" he hated piercings, just like his mother.

"I thought it'd be cool but it didn't work out. It grew over too fast,"

He paused for a second, probably examining my ear for lingering marks.

"Remember when Chiharu asked if I had a dream while I was unconscious?" I hardly got the words out of my mouth before he was at neck again. Did he want me to punch him?

"Anyways, I could have gone and asked Chiharu-_san_ but I figured I'd tell you first since I have it figured out, more or less."

"It's just a dream, right?"

I rolled my eyes. "I wouldn't be telling either of you if it was just a 'dream'."

"So what was it? A vision?" he retorted skeptically.

"Yeah,"

He laid his chin on my shoulder again, pondering.

"I saw the Yukiona from Agano and the Beni-hime from the past,"

"Are you sure? You hit your head pretty hard," I seriously considered hitting him, though it wouldn't do much in my current state.

"I'm sure," I shot back. "It was too vivid to have been a regular dream and had too much information for me to just ignore it,"

He sighed. "Alright, what went on?"

At least I had his attention now. "The Yukiona appeared and explained that my body and soul weren't connected or something and said she and the other's were taking advantage of it to show me the 'truth of the past'.

"I was suddenly in front of a shrine with red maples surrounding it. It was pretty obvious that it was the Beni-hime's shrine," I felt kind of stupid since I could almost see him raising his eyebrows in my mind's eye. "Anyways, it was raining and a scraggly Oni was using the small shrine to get out of the weather. He fell asleep and the Beni-hime appeared. She was pretty normal, just a simple tochigami,"

"Like you sister?" he interrupted.

"Not exactly. Nee-san is a living land god,"

"Ho? So she wasn't alive?"

This was a part he wasn't familiar with. "She wasn't alive to begin with. She's always been a spirit, something without a solid form. I think she was born from the red maples around that shrine and became the protector of the land through prayer from passing people. Some gods are born that way,"

"Right," it was kind of sad that purebred Oni didn't even know their own lore. Maybe they considered themselves separate from it?

"So, by now I've figured out he's a Kurosawa Oni. He had practically the same hair color as me and Oka-san's red eyes. That was where the connection first began. The Beni-hime seemed to have loved him a lot,"

That threw him for a loop. "How? He couldn't see her, right?"

"It was a one sided love," the Oni even had to have children at some point.

"Oh? I feel sorry for her," he hugged me tighter to his chest, nuzzling my jaw.

"Can we be serious for a couple more minutes?"

"I am being serious," he returned.

"Just a couple more minutes?"

He relented after another soft kiss.

"Um, anyways, a few years passed and the shrine is burned down and only one red maple tree remains amidst all the rubble. I don't know what happened but he shows up again and so does the Beni-hime," I felt like I was rushing, no, I knew I was rushing. "She's . . . desperate and tries talking to him even though he can't hear her. Two other Oni show up and he calls them traitors. I think they must have been trying to usurp his position in the family or something because they were there to kill him.

"The Beni-hime freaks out and tries to tell him to run. She calls his Oni name, 'Kazuouki', but he obviously can't hear her and seems resigned to dying. I intend to find out if there was ever an Oni called Kazuouki,"

Chikage growled unhappily. "You'd probably only find his name if you searched the Kurosawa Oni's family registry."

I shook my head, "That's already impossible. The next scene is years later and the Beni-hime has become a vengeful spirit. The last descendant of the Kurosawa Oni confronts her and asks for her help,"

He made me stop again with a question. "How could he confront her if he couldn't see her?"

"Well, _she _was blind and probably had greater spiritual sensitivity." Maybe there was a difference between mine and Chikage's

ability to sense presences. It might have been hereditary. "Her grandfather told her to seek the Hime out or something like that. Going by the context, Kazuouki was probably her grandfather's great-grandfather. If she didn't know that was his Oni name then their probably was no registry. Kazuouki had been pretty poor looking so I guess the Kurosawa weren't a cardinal family at that point in time.

"I don't even know her name, but she was the last descendant and wanted to continue her bloodline but her fianc  wanted to marry someone healthier. He must have been marrying into her family name, which probably means it had become a cardinal family between Kazuouki's time and hers."

"Five or six hundred years ago the Southern Oni were known as the Mizumoto," he informed. "She made a deal with the Beni-hime in order for the Kurosawa to remain a cardinal family?"

I nodded. "She accepted the Beni-hime's blood and became her host. It appeared that her ailments were healed and I suppose her fianc  was more interested in her afterwards."

"That's where it ended?" it sounded like he had just been getting into the story. I'd forgotten that he seemed to like that type of thing. He was always interested in learning the history behind things.

"Yeah. I didn't really find out more about the Hime, just what made her the way she is today,"

"That's important in its own way," he responded. "It's hard to believe that the Beni-hime's been kept a secret for so long, especially when her influence allowed the Kurosawa to survive."

I rested my head against his shoulder and he absently smoothed my hair.

"So, I have the Yukiona of Agano to thank for fixing your head?" he joked.

I jabbed him in the side and all seriousness disappeared.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

The words were on the tip of my tongue but it hardly seemed like the best time to say them. He didn't wait for my answer anyways.

"Nothing? Good," and he was back to kissing any bare skin he could reach. He ran a finger around my collar and I awkwardly turned around, meaning to glare at him.

He must have been waiting for me to look back at him. One disarming kiss later and I was too disorientated to care. His hand roamed across my back, drawing circles.

I pulled away to take a deep breath, trying to escape his scent that fogged up my thoughts.

"When do I get to see that?" he inquired.

It took me a minute to figure out what 'that' was.

"You pervert!"

He chuckled. "I'm just curious,"

He didn't specify whether he was more curious about the tattoo or just seeing more of my bare skin. I didn't dare ask him which it was.

We both heard Emi tromping towards us and reluctantly disentangled. I put my hands to my cheeks, hoping the slightly cooler temperature would chase the flushness away.

* * *

><p>I was back to training as the end of winter neared. Only a few banks of snow remained and the ground was a muddy mess. It made training a chore.<p>

Chikage was mostly serious while sparing with me now. He didn't hold back and pushed me harder than I had ever pushed myself. I was glad he wasn't the one trying to become the leader of Agano.

"Don't you think I could kick Sakurano's butt yet?" I panted and took a long drink from the bamboo canister.

"Stupid, you're still weaker in your right arm,"

I scoffed at him. "What do you expect? I still feel my elbow in practically everything I do," I stretched my arm out, hiding a wince. I could move it fine, it just felt really odd.

He ran a hand through his bangs, shaking a few drops of sweat out. "You should have waited longer,"

"It was boring," I whined. "Your mom was trying to teach me how to sew,"

He laughed at that. I couldn't see myself sitting and quietly sewing either.

"I heard you were painting. Why didn't you show me?"

I shrugged. "It wasn't the greatest. My hand was shaking,"

He picked up his own canister, drawing the last drop of water out. "One more round?" he suggested.

"One more," I agreed.

I'd learned that Kazama was good at predicting and countering moves, therefore most of my practice went into feinting and avoiding close quarter attacks.

I took the initiative, as I usually did, and swung hard at his side. His blade was there in an instant, sparks of youki flying.

The Imperial Chrysanthemum had been rowdier recently. Kazama had to

replace his swords a couple times; they were no match for the demon steel. It worried me a little; occasionally the blade seemed to grow hotter in my hands, as though it were rebelling.

My blade bounced off his and I quickly brought it back. He was quicker and before I could stop myself I was down on my butt, wet earth squelching. I was glad I was wearing my yukata. Ami-san would murder me for getting Emi's clothes dirty.

He sheathed his sword, satisfied. I helped myself up, the damp cold already seeping through my clothes. I definitely wanted a bath now.

"Don't forget to watch your feet," he smugly advised.

"You jerk,"

He had the audacity to pat my butt, which almost resulted in him losing his nose. Putting up with his perverted comments had been easy compared to this. He grabbed at me any chance he could get.

"Watch where you're swinging that!"

I tucked my sword back into my belt before I could accidentally hurt him. I stepped towards the path back to the house but brought up solid and nearly walked my arm out of its socket.

"We don't have to go back right away," he murmured, drawing me into his embrace.

I wriggled away. I was too warm and sweaty to care for his attention right now. "I want a bath,"

He muttered some nonsense under his breath, following it up with a grudging, "Of course,"

We walked back to the house without skipping. There wasn't really a point since we were in a clearing maybe five minutes away.

Through leafless branches I spotted Ami-san and Emi pinning up laundry.

"Nee-chan!" Emi called, almost dropping her basket as she waved to us. "You're both covered in mud,"

I assessed my yukata. It was flecked with specks of dirt. Chikage's was much the same, though he hadn't sat in it like I had.

"It's mucky no matter where we go," he explained.

Ami-san blew out an irritated breath. "You should do your own laundry,"

He grimaced. He'd probably ruin it if he attempted to do it. I could do laundry if I had to but it was definitely not my favorite chore.

He tried to blend out of the scenery. "Anyways, you can have the bath first since you fell ass first into the mud,"

I gasped indignantly. "You tripped me, jerk,"

Ami-san didn't seem to mind my language if it was directed at either Chikage or Chiaki. If I spoke coarsely to anyone else she'd wring my neck out.

He crossed his arms and turned, a small grin falling in place. I bent down and gathered up a handful of grime. Ami-san pinned up a towel, as though encouraging me to go ahead and throw itâ€”while she couldn't see.

I slung it quickly. My aim was true and it splattered across the back of his neck. He cringed and reached a hand trembling from rage (probably) to flick the gunk off.

"I'll go take my bath now," I stretched, thoroughly pleased with myself. "Talk to you later,"

He pseudo teleported by and I swore I heard him utter 'not a chance,'.

"Was there any reason for that?" Ami-san chided but there was a curious angle to her lips and ghosts of small dimples.

"Not really. Well, yeah. No reason," I could say I was mad about him tripping me, though I wasn't really. He'd just tempted me with his cocky attitude.

"Do not track any mud into the house. I will make mop the entire floor if you do,"

* * *

><p>Mopping was the least of my worries as the day dragged on. Chikage looked like he was itching to get even. After my bath I stayed inside, not risking a muddy projectile being tossed at me from behind.<p>

I sat between Ami-san and Emi at supper, partially anticipating retribution. He was definitely plotting something.

My miso soup had just cooled off enough to sip when Kazama-dono pushed his tray away.

"Oka-san, you might want to clean up quickly,"

It was the first time I'd heard him address her as such. Usually it was just 'Ami'.

She sighed. "Visitors at supper time?" Honestly,"

Everyone seemed somewhat surprised and I moodily gathered up my dished. Ami took it from me before I could protest. I hadn't even gotten to eat my pickled vegetables.

I froze. There was a terribly chilling aura approaching, like a mountain storm. I knew it and swallowed the lump in my throat. Chikage gazed at me sidelong.

"I believe they are here for you," Kazama-dono commented.

I nodded my agreement, glad that I'd been able to convince Ami-san to let me carry my swords around due to their nature.

Kazama-dono opened the shoji to the courtyard outside and an unnatural wind blew in.

"Good evening, Wakehisa-sama," Kazama-dono greeted. "What brings you here?"

Six figures materialized, all stocky and dark haired with jewel green eyes. One figure was much older, almost stooped over even.

"How are you, Kazama-kun?"

Kazama-dono placidly bowed back. "I am good," I was confused as to why he didn't ask the older Oni how he was until I realized there was acid between the two.

A younger Oni with half pinned up hair took a daring step closer. "Do you realize what you've taken in, Kazama-sama?"

It hurt, to be addressed like that. I suppose they had more than enough reason to. Even I could barely accept myself as more than a beast when I recalled how I had been and what the Beni-hime had done.

Kazama-dono faced them, head held high and shoulders straight and confident. I'd always seen him as a house cat type of person but he was as fierce as a mountain dog right then.

"I am well aware of who I have let into my home," he crossed his arms and stood his ground. "You, however, are unaware of the gravity of stepping upon my land,"

The old man cackled. "What will you do, Kazama boy?" he pointed a gnarled finger at him. "You have sworn never to raise a hand to another Oni,"

Kazama-dono was unfazed. "I have two capable fighters here if the situation arises, until then I ask you for your respect."

The four Oni standing behind the two prominent figures became slightly nervous. Their eyes occasionally flickered to Chikage who already rested his palm on his hilt.

I assumed the younger Oni, maybe a few years older than me, was the Wakehisa's heir. He had that type of look about him.

"Kazama-sama, we did not come here to anger you. We are merely here to speak with the Oni of the Tengu's Mountain,"

That was their first time hearing that name, though they knew right away that it belonged to me. No one looked to me for confirmation, trusting me enough to provide an answer.

"Do you really need six men to talk to a single girl?"

The old one chortled shortly before glaring at me, turning his crooked finger on me. "I could have sent the entire clan and risked

losing every last one of them."

Somehow, that made me feel just a bit proud, though the sharp intake from Emi quickly doused that. I'd hoped she would never have to hear about that. It was only implied but she knew, as well as everyone else now, that I had killed other Oni.

I didn't have anything to retort to the old man and his young companion posed another query.

"The Tengu promised us that you would be kept under his wing, yet we find you outside and the Tengu provides no answer to our pleas. What exactly is your master planning?"

I thought I might have heard the barest hint of humor from him. They seemed to like Takeshi-sama even less than Chikage.

"I have been in his care, though I have no idea what he might be planning." He had been acting strangely during his visit over the summer.

"Why are you not there now?" the older Oni snapped. I wondered just how old he was.

"I wasn't told I had to stay there," I rebuked. His anger resonated in the air and I hoped he was as feeble as he looked. "What does it matter to you? Isn't it better that I'm away you land?"

Wakehisa's heir lightly patted the old man's shoulder, as though to calm him. "We were promised," promised that I wouldn't cause them anymore trouble.

I didn't buy their front at all. Takeshi-sama would never promise to keep me locked away and why should they care if I had left the North. It didn't matter anyways.

"Something like that doesn't bind me anymore." I remarked.

They both raised their eyebrows.

"What do you mean?"

I stepped closer to the Oni outside and saw Chikage crinkle his toes. Ami-san ground her teeth but stayed quiet while Kazama-dono let me take the spotlight.

"I spent my time as a shrine guardian for Takeshi-sama and my older sister; naturally I wasn't supposed to leave the grounds for any length of time." I let that sink in before continuing. "Though willingly, it was still contracted work. But, the contract has expired and Takeshi-sama has yet to renew it."

The old Wakehisa grunted. "In other words, you are no longer under the protection of the Old Crow?"

"That's one way to put it," my kodachi was hot at my hip and it seemed to be spreading to my katana. It sensed the rising tension in the air.

I hadn't thought Oni would so easily be brought to blows, but it

seemed likely that either side might spring.

"You should have chosen a better place to hide yourself," after having said that the old man gestured and the four Oni jumped.

They weren't the most experienced fighters, as it was immediately clear that their targets were Emi and Ami-san, the weakest.

I found myself protecting Emi again, darting in front of her.

But I was afraid.

I was afraid of unsheathing my blade, of calling on the Hime, of transforming. I was afraid of spilling blood while she stood with her mouth hanging agape.

"O immoveable one," I chanted, "show me your wisdom!"

The Oni who charged at Emi bounced off a shimmering blue bubble and I held my hand stiffly to maintain the barrier. I hadn't used spells in quite a while and hadn't understood until now just how taxing they were to use outside of spiritually saturated land, like Nee-san's.

I unsheathed my long sword and shook my hair out, quickly chopping off a chunk near the bottom. The idiot who'd run into the shield hadn't even noticed it was disrupted by my change in stance and wearily watched.

There was a white snake scale in my sleeve that I'd been carrying around since visiting the Demon Bone Yard. I didn't think it would come in handy so soon.

"I beseech thee, sleeping serpent, awaken and answer my prayers!" the silvery scale melted into the fistful of hair and began to writhe in my hand. I let go and it transformed into a ghostly snake, longer than I was tall.

The Oni I was dealing with chose to face the snake, only to be bitten and paralyzed. He wouldn't die but he certainly wouldn't be moving either.

Chikage bumped into my back and I spared a glance back at him. His sword had broken, leaving just a stump.

"I thought you'd be showing off your skill with the blade," he teased, even though we still had two more to deal with. The one he knocked out laid flat on the ground, a nasty wilt on his temple from being smashed with the hilt. Chikage was brutal.

"I summoned something helpful instead," indeed, the white snake was standing guard around Emi and Ami-san. Kazama-dono and Chikage's brothers were similarly standing guard.

The sword in my hand complained mutely, a glimmer of rusty blood reflecting off the blade. The katana had been more temperamental since being joined with the kodachi.

"You've changed, Aka-Oni,"

That name unsettled me. Only Kouta called me that.

The Oni who'd spoken held his sword rigidly in one hand and I finally noted his one armed state.

"I was hoping you'd show your blood stained form once again," he smirked as he announced that. His smoky green eyes were suddenly familiar.

_Ho? I thought we killed him? _The Beni-hime interrupted.

I was getting better at receiving her thoughts now and even better at maintaining the connection.

_So did I, but Oni are pretty tough. _I guess my count had gone down to twenty-two.

"What's wrong?" he taunted, "You look conflicted,"

I held the Imperial Chrysanthemum tighter with both hands. "Not at all, I'm just wondering if anyone else survived."

Ha-ha, are you going to kill him for good?

No.

He shot me a disgusted glower. "Just one other,"

Twenty-one. Still twenty-one too many.

"I came to get even," he boldly proclaimed.

"There's no such thing as even," and I broke away from the comforting support of Chikage's backup.

* * *

><p>Please review! I had a bit of fun with this chapter XD poor Chikage.

April 14th, Chapter 28: Steel Petal style.

29. Steel Petal style

Please review!

**Thanks for the review, Juliedoo! Mud makes anyone feel annoyed XD my cat is mostly white and now that the snow is melting I have to clean her up every time she comes back in x.x on the other hand, people in most parts of Japan already get to see the cherry blossoms T^T make me jealous. **

Sorry that you were at school, EverRose808 D: I'm on holiday until the sixteenth :D it was okay to have a cliffhanger since the update was coming in less than a week XD I try not to torment my readers with cliffhangers too often :)

**I'm sorry that I confused you, silentxangel x.x The Kurosawa Oni are Southern Oni. The Wakehisa are Northern Oni. Ayame's mother was a Southern Oni and she was not exiled from the South, she escaped after

being imprisoned by them. Ayame is not exiled, she and her sister ran to the North after their parents were killed. Her half brother is a Southern Oni and the 'Visitors from the North' are of the same group that she killed twelve (two survived so ten) Oni in the past (before she knew Chikage). The Southern Oni apparently do not know where she is and the Northern Oni were able to track her from her home in the North to Kazama's home based on the fact that she left with a blonde Oni, Kazama Chikage. Let's pretend the Kazama Oni, or Western Oni, are the only Oni in Japan that have blonde hair.**

The chapter 'Oni of the South' was her brother, a Kurosawa Oni, from the South come to try his luck at bringing the host of the Beni-hime back to her cardinal family. I had foreshadowing earlier about why Ayame stayed up a lot during the night, something along the lines of "waiting for an enemy that never appears/comes." She was referring to the fact that the Kurosawa Oni were still after she and her sister. The last chapter was 'Visitors from the North' and was the Northern Wakehisa Oni come to try their luck at retrieving Ayame as well. They know her simply as the Tengu's Oni and want her for themselves, despite her having killed their men in the past.

Chiaki and Chiharu are staying back since they are unarmed (I'm pretty sure I mentioned at least Chiaki being unarmed a couple chapters back) and the Northern Oni are. I'm sure they'd jump in and help if Chikage or Ayame needed help but they kick their butts pretty soundly. Chikage's the only pro Oni in my story that can fight another Oni barehanded anyways. Actually, Amagiri could too :(

Takeshi did take them in but he's old _and_ old fashioned, therefore he would have given them work rather than just taking care of them. That's why Hinata is a land god despite her constitution and Ayame is the shrine's familiar or guardian. He loves them like daughters but he isn't about to let them freeload XD

**Killing other Oni is a no-no too, thanks to their endangerment. Ayame's in enough trouble for killing eighteen (ten from the past, eight in the storyline) but Kazama-dono is much older and probably has the deaths of a couple hundred Oni on his hands. That's why he's sworn to never raise a hand to another Oni. They're _supposed_ to be in a more peaceful era as well, but the Northern Oni are a bunch of conceited jerks. Emi is only twelve and has lived a sheltered life, so though she knows her father and brother have a bloody streak she hasn't actually seen it firsthand. Even if she's an Oni, she's twelve. (Now I'm being a hypocrite since Ayame first killed when she was ten, by my calculations x.x she's sixteen right now and killed the Northern Oni five or six years ago according to her older sister from a chapter way back when x.x) **

**Yes, Ayame has matured. She wants to become a person who doesn't have to kill to lead because she understands the importance of life. Even if that's the case, it isn't just the Beni-hime and the Imperial Chrysanthemum that can make her lose control. I've been steadily implying that Ayame's weakness isn't in her physical strength; it's in her heart. When she killed the fox and the spider she wasn't under the influence of the Hime or the Imperial Chrysanthemum, that was all her. Ayame doesn't care about spilling blood when she's in full swing and that's what she loathes. She's a hypocrite. She wants to be merciful because it looks good, on the other hand she's about as

compassionate as Sesshomaru when she draws her sword.**

In conclusion, Ayame knows the value of life and of death and hates the part of her that ignores that. Sorry for ranting but maybe it makes up for me being half-assed while explaining and plotting things out in the past x.x thanks for the review :D

Thanks for the review, Whimsicott! I sincerely believe Kazama is a closet pervert in the games and anime XD good job with your story, by the way :D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 28: Steel Petal style.

She faced the one armed Oni, golden eyes blank. Her transparent gaze was opaque for once and the connection between us disappeared.

Neither one of them transformed, clashing with their surface strength. It was almost even, considering his one armed state and Ayame's injury.

The other Oni ran at me, sword raised over his head. He had a better chance against Ayame's snake.

I was disappointed by the level of training the Wakehisa Oni had received. He practically walked into the butt of my sword. The Shinsengumi had been more formidable.

I turned back to Ayame who had already disarmed her opponent. She pointed the Imperial Chrysanthemum at him, the blade pulsating hungrily.

She tensed and I sprang from my place, grabbing her wrist. Ayame blinked and lowered her sword.

"There's no point in killing him," I whispered, loud enough for only her to hear. I carefully let go, satisfied that the Beni-hime was still dormant.

"I know,"

Old Wakehisa sniffed and leaned on his cane which he'd kept hidden under his open coat. The contours of it were straight but I didn't doubt that there was a hidden blade in the wooden shaft.

The younger Oni hadn't moved. I'd met him once before, at a funeral when he was barely more than a child. Wakehisa Wakahiro. His older brother Takahiko had fought on the same side of a skirmish that I had.

Takahiko had just been one of many young Oni that died. I'd been lucky enough to survive that hell.

"Have you gotten weaker?"

She glared back at him, knuckles white from gripping her katana

I hated his appraising stare. He was sizing her up, just as I had done when I first saw her. Any female Oni would turn heads; Ayame just guaranteed an extra long look.

"Maybe the warrior Tengu's influence has weakened,"

It probably didn't matter to her that the Tengu had done some pretty sketchy things. He was someone she looked up to and she wouldn't sit still while he slandered his name.

"Takeshi-sama's influence has never affected my actions,"

Wakahiro frowned. "Answer us this then: for what reason did you slay ten of our men?" his composure loosened, maybe because he was standing face to face with a girl who hardly looked capable of such a feat. "Who or what were you trying to protect?"

Her expression hadn't changed at all. I wanted to end this situation; I couldn't stand seeing her so drained of her usual emotions.

"The reason you're asking for is just an excuse. It won't change the fact that I killed your men in cold blood,"

Emi whimpered quietly. "Nee-san, is that true?"

"Sorry, Emi-chan."

Wakehisa-sama scowled at her and tapped his cane. "Oni are on the verge of extinction, every lost life is felt by the community. Gone are the days when we watched our kin die without reason,"

It was impossible for Ayame to even begin to understand the severity of our endangerment. She'd grown up in the North where it seemed like every demon species was still flourishing. Even the Wakehisa Oni had strength in numbers, though they weren't about to flaunt them here.

"Why should it have ever been okay to watch your kin die?" she retorted saucily. "Life can easily be taken but not so easily given back. I understand that better than you do, you dirty old man."

I almost palmed my forehead. She was just picking a fight now. What had set her off? Maybe she was just as irritated by Wakahiro's wandering gaze as I was.

"Hold your tongue!" Wakahiro roared. His hand inched towards his own katana, an elegant golden engraving along the sheath. "We have every right to demand your life,"

I hadn't thought they'd even consider that. If anything, they should have been trying to twist her arm and force her into a marriage with one of their own.

She didn't flinch at the threat. "I still can't figure out why you chose to seek me out now of all times. Maybe you only recently noticed that I had left? Or maybe there's a reason for you be concerned now,"

"It must be something rather important if you felt it necessary to

cross into another Oni's land without announcing your intentions," I added. What they were doing went against all our principles and formalities.

The old man snorted. "We are calling in a favor,"

"From whom?" Chichiue inquired.

"From that girl," he growled. "She killed our men and lived on our land; she owes us quite a bit."

She scoffed. "You forget who actually governs the land,"

I hadn't realized she could react this way to anybody. She acted disrespectfully towards me but usually in defense to my own rude words. She at least tried to be polite to strangers. Not that they deserved it.

The old man gave her that much. It was true she'd never lived anywhere near their residence; she'd stayed well out of their way for the most part. It didn't get much further away than on a mountain that could only be reached by those who already knew the exact location and path.

"Let us get something straight, youngling. We can easily take what is dear to you away and it matters not to us if the Kazama Oni try to stand in our way."

Oka-san gasped indignantly. She knew a threat when she heard one. Chiaki and Chiharu stood closer to Emi, ready to fend off an entire army should they need to.

Ayame hopped off the decking, her small feet sinking just a little in the mucky ground. The simple gesture relayed to them that she did not want them to involve us.

"Whether under contract or not, I am devoted to being a guardian. It _matters _not to _me _if I have to kick your butt to make you take back those words."

Wakahiro seemed to have grown tired of the bantering and drew his sword. I immediately knew it was demon steel, as did Ayame. The blade was a frosty white and as he lowered it, the tip touching the ground, the moisture in the soil began to freeze.

Ayame drew her katana again, the kodachi neglected at her side. I could feel the will of the blade for once and an unsettled chill ran down my spine.

I wanted to step in but couldn't. It was one on one. If the old man tried to step in I would interfere, as was only fair, and I hoped his skill had rusted over the years. He was once my father's rival.

"I want to see that power for myself," Wakahiro remarked. He had a confident air about him, arrogantly thinking there was no way a female Oni could best him in battle. "The power that makes you the Tengu's Oni,"

Both Ayame and I noticed there was a misconception of information. The Northern Oni seemed to think that Ayame's red form was something

gifted to her by the Tengu.

My family still didn't know of its origins either and I wondered how both sides would feel knowing that a fellow cardinal family had overstepped the boundaries of regular Oni strength. It had never happened before, though it would definitely make the punishment for blood sharing seem like a slap on the wrist.

His hair faded white and his horns sprouted, Ayame's transformation following less than second later. I hadn't actually trained her how to spur the change on but it didn't matter now, seeing as she did it naturally.

The next few seconds were blinding flashes of white, frost flying from his strange demon blade and her long hair whirling about. There was a pause and he smugly took a hand from his hilt to tuck a strand of hair behind a pointed ear.

Ayame struggled to remove her left hand from the lower half of her hilt and my eyes widened just a fraction. From her fingertips to her wrist was a painful looking purple bruise, though I quickly realized it was severe frostbite.

"That blade is forged from a Yukiona's hair, isn't it?"

His lips turned down. "How could you tell?"

She put her hand back on the hilt and shrugged. "The man who gathered the pieces of this blade never once killed a Yukiona, because he himself was descended from one. You could say you've angered his blade,"

The blade was indeed steaming and the cold slowly retreated from her hands. There was a faint high pitched humming and I had no doubt in my mind that it was coming from the Imperial Chrysanthemum.

"Have you ever seen fear and hatred?"

He didn't respond and she took a deep breath. The blade glowed red and I assumed she had been holding it back. The mist that rolled off the blade settled on the ground around her feet, thawing it out instantly.

A sultry wind billowed but the deadly scarlet gas remained looped around her. Her eyes were completely sedate. "If I win, without harming you, get out of here. If I lose, I'll I accept whatever favor you request."

The old man smiled crookedly and replied for Wakahiro who was focused on the task at hand. Even he could feel that the bite from her blade wouldn't be pleasant.

"If you lose you will marry my grandson without complaint,"

I wanted to step in right then and there but Ayame directed a tiny swirl of the sword's youki at me, telling me both to stand down and that she was in control of the situation.

"That's fine. Disarm to win?"

Wakahiro nodded then charged in. Ayame met the powerful strike with a simple guard, holding out against his strength. He pulled away first, glancing at the small chip in his blade. It seemed like the Imperial Chrysanthemum's corrosive aura wasn't in full swing, yet.

"I'll break that blade in two more swings with my Steel Petal style," Ayame informed him quietly. She'd finally come up with a name for her sword style, one that suited her almost as much as her own name.

I suddenly remembered the first time we sparred. She had used a move back then as her last resort, three strikes that broke her opponents sword. It caused damage to her weapon as well and I had to wonder which demon blade would break first. Even the Imperial Chrysanthemum had become discolored around the area where their blades had grinded.

"Just try it," he challenged.

She appeared before him and her speed even surprised me. He was forced to bring his blade up to parry, even though she had promised not to injure him for whatever reason.

A crack appeared on his blade and Ayame leapt back to avoid his frenzied slash. There was a speck of fear in his green eyes.

Blood dropped to the ground and I anxiously scanned her. He'd managed to cut her right forearm, deeply.

"Do you give up?" he taunted, probably thinking she'd be deterred by the wound. If she was, she wouldn't show it. She was too stubborn to show weakness when she had gotten herself into this mess in the first place.

"This is nothing," she answered. The demonic energy she'd been keeping at bay rose up and wrapped around her arm, the blood sizzling. The sleeve of her sunset yukata dropped away and revealed that the gash had been cauterized.

He shot her a disgusted look. He should have given up then and there if he couldn't handle her bizarre methods and headstrong attitude.

She raised her blade again, waiting for him to make the final move. I saw the small blemish on the Imperial Chrysanthemum and unease settled in my stomach. If his blade didn't break on the next swing hers might very well crack off instead.

His nostrils flared and he sprang forward once more, determined to win by any means necessary.

Ayame danced back, her feet lightly touching the ground. Her weaker arm was close enough for him to reach with one more step, tempting him to move inside of her range.

The moment he did she brought her sword around faster than he anticipated and he again brought his blade up, forgetting that she had no intention of harming him. The upper half of the blade disappeared and she stepped around him, wrenching the hilt from his hands by stabbing the tip of her blade into his hand guard.

A second later the part of his sword that had vanished dug into the roof above us and Ayame flicked the hilt away and sheathed hers in one smooth motion.

Wakahiro's mouth dropped and he turned just slightly to gape at the victor.

"Do you still want to see the form that makes me known as the 'Tengu's Oni'?" she mocked.

Old Wakehisa gave a disgruntled sigh. "You won, and that can't be argued or denied. However, the right remains to us to ask for your death,"

I was done listening to their crap. They were in the wrong for coming here to demand it.

Chiaki spoke up before me, which annoyed me to no end.

"It is not us who you must ask,"

He let out a frustrated breath. "Who then?"

"The Kurosawa Oni," Ayame finished. "Though I'm barely their responsibility, I'm just the daughter of one of their runaways,"

Telling the Northern Oni risked her being hunted down by her clan. They'd probably let the Kurosawa Oni know that they had seen a member of their family behaving as she would.

"I couldn't just sit still and die even if I wanted to. There's someone who wouldn't let me,"

She was probably referring to the Beni-hime but I had to ponder what my family possibly thought.

The first of the Oni we had knocked out was stirring and Wakehisa turned.

"Very well then. Wakahiro, collect those four and let us be on our way."

He obeyed stiffly, lifting one over his shoulders and rooting another awake.

No sooner had they left did the Imperial Chrysanthemum snap, aura dispersing. Ayame let go and backed into the decking, sitting down heavily. Her hair returned to its usual green-sheened-black and she gathered it in her arms, measuring the section she had cut off.

I had to laugh. "Is that all you're worried about? You just made an enemy of the Northern Oni and possibly revealed your location to the Southern Oni,"

She brushed it off with a dismissing tilt of the head. "I held back, I'm sure I don't have much to worry about if that's the extent of skill,"

"What about your arm?" I rebuked.

"I was distracted," she admitted.

I gave her an incredulous look. "What were you distracted by in the middle of a fight?" I'd properly scold her for engaging in a fight that risked her hand later.

She turned her palms up and I felt some of my vexation melt away. They were burnt much worse than her arm, though both had healed a bit by now.

"The Imperial Chrysanthemum won't listen to me anymore, since it can no longer rule me through my own fear."

That was solid proof of her growth; she no longer had to rely on the sword for its immense power. It also proved that the sword was still too tenacious for regular usage.

She beckoned the white snake forward and it wrapped around her arm, head resting in the palm of her hand. She removed the kodachi from her belt and tossed it on the ground next to the broken katana.

"O slain serpent, return to the grave with evil in tow."

The snake proceeded to bite her, bloody characters appearing across its back. It uncoiled itself and slithered to the two swords, lying across them. It turned pitch black before disintegrating.

"Was that a seal?" I questioned.

She stood again, retrieving both halves of the blade and slipping them into the sheath. "That was miko work, banishment of evil intent, if you will. The Imperial Chrysanthemum isn't able to exude its power,"

Chiaki approached me and pointed to Wakahiro's discarded demon blade. "What about that one?"

"It's broken so it's pretty much useless now. Agano is the only place in Nippon that currently has the ability to repair demon steel, but their guardian deity is a Yukiona. I doubt they'll want to touch it for fear of upsetting her."

"Nee-san," Emi interrupted.

Ayame reluctantly glanced up at her. The pained half-grimace was plainly expressing her feelings. She hadn't wanted Emi to ever know of her darker side.

"You saved me, that has to count for something, right?"

"I saved one person, just one person, with that form. That doesn't even begin to make up for the ones I brutally killed with it." She deliberated for a moment. "There's a stigma attached to the Kurosawa Oni and it's physically manifested through me."

She seemed to be at a loss for words, unsure how to share something that both terrified and shamed her. She'd been quietly suffering since the Beni-hime had appeared, always worrying about her next move.

"Ayame hosts a being called the Beni-hime," I continued. "It's taxing and generally quite stressful. The Beni-hime is capable of forcing her conscious under, though she's usually stubborn enough to hold her own."

She was dissatisfied with the image I painted. "I'd like to blame her for the Northern Oni she killed but it doesn't change the fact that she used my body to accomplish that. Pushing the blame onto a vengeful spirit is hardly appropriate,"

Chiharu jumped in first. He finally had the last piece of the puzzle. "Why don't you just exorcise her?"

I had the same thought, though I concluded the Tengu would have already done that if it was within his power.

"She rivals gods. If I could ask I would but gods exist on a higher plane of existence, naturally making it impossible." Ayame had put her own thought into it. "Any other methods would likely kill me and even then she would just transfer to her next best host,"

"Then why not transfer her to another host?" Chiaki suggested, trying for an air of nonchalance.

Ayame was willing to hold onto the Beni-hime for as long as could to prevent anyone else from being troubled. There was no way she would just push it off onto someone else.

She was fed up with talk of the Hime. She didn't even like talking to me about her, especially in present context.

"Are you dumb?" she fixed him with an icy glare. "She doesn't just leave her previous host for another one; when she finds a new suitable host, she drives her current one mad."

I'd already heard it from Hinata but it still made my shoulders feel heavy. I refused to accept that as her fate.

She turned her head towards the woods after her outburst, preferring not to see the reactions from my family.

They'd mostly figured it out on their own, though the concrete facts were more than a little jarring. Emi was silently crying, a mixture of pity for Ayame's less than favorable state and a subtle amount of hurt from being left in the dark for so long.

"I should leave, it isn't right for me to be bringing trouble to your home."

I was fine with her decision, as long as she didn't mind me following.

Chichiue seemed like he wanted to say something to reassure her but Oka-san cut him off with an outraged huff.

"You stupid girl, we already knew you were trouble." Oka-san stomped over to her and hauled her up onto the deck by the elbows, indifferent to her muddy feet for once.

She was stupefied for a moment before Oka-san hugged her shoulders, gently stroking her hair. It was probably her first time being subjected to a mother's fierce protectiveness.

"If you still insist on leaving at least let me straighten your hair out first." Maybe it was just another case of my mother's extreme measures.

* * *

><p>I sat with Chiharu later that night. Oka-san and Emi had convinced Ayame to stay longer, yet again.<p>

I was curious about what Oka-san had done with her hair but she'd walked straight past me without saying a word. Her hair was done up at the time and I couldn't exactly tell how much she had cut off.

"Pass me that book over there,"

I complied. He was cleaning up, ready to return some books now that his research was finished.

"Why do you think the Wakehisa seemed so desperate?" I asked.

Chiharu tied a few books together with rough string before replying. "Didn't you hear? Wakahiro's bride, previously his deceased brother's bride, was stolen by the Yamauchi Oni."

I sorted through a group of books and bound them together. "What a bold move for a clan smaller than our own,"

"Indeed. The Wakehisa were lenient enough to let it pass, forcing them to pledge a daughter for the next generation's head and a son for their reputation instead."

"And they were hoping to use Ayame as a replacement?" I snorted, like hell they were.

"That would be logical. I'm surprised they left her alone for so long,"

I rolled my shoulders. "Apparently, they tried to abduct her once when she was younger. The Beni-him reacted badly and ended up killing them off, as you know."

"So that's what happened," he didn't bother fishing for more information. He was content with what he had.

There was a terse silence, broken by Chiharu's offhand musing.

"How long you have liked her, I wonder."

"Are you trying to tease me?" it was a little late for him to start acting like a nosy older brother.

"No good?"

I shook my head. I suppose that meant he approved.

"When are you leaving tomorrow?"

I shrugged. "First thing, probably,"

He handed me a load of books. "I see. Do be courteous to her,"

"Yes, yes," maybe.

* * *

><p>Uwah Q.Q nothing is coming out the way I want it to
T.T

Anyways, please review :D and I'm sorry if anyone else is feeling confused by this point D: I'll try to straighten things out since it'd be cruel to recommend going back and reading through 100,000+ words x.x

April 18, Chapter 29: Steel Flower.

30. Bones that become steel

Please review! Five more chapters x.x I don't know if I can cram it all together XD I can't. This chapter was supposed to be 'Steel Flower' but it would have been close to 8000 words XD I called it 'Bones that become steel' instead and I'll have to have an unscheduled update to make up for the extra chapter between now and May 14**th****. Chapter 30 will be 'Steel Flower' and will be in Ayame' POV again.**

Thanks for the super quick review, EverRose808! Spring break in my area is always Good Friday and the week after. Sadly, that might be changing in the next couple years and we'll be taking it during mid March instead Q.Q I like having it during Easter :T but I'll probably be graduated by then anyways XD

I love snakes. I think they're just so darn cool but alas, he was just a spell v.v

Thanks for the review, silentxangel :D I didn't mind using up the space considering it boosted my word count xD the one who fought with Ayame was the Wakehisa that is younger than Chikage, so obviously not a match for his father. Chikage could have kicked Wakehisa Wakahiro's butt :D the older Wakehisa was Papa Kazama's rival. As for the Wakehisa Oni, you described them quite well XD

UWAH! The Wakehisa Oni cannot have Emi-chan D: that would be horrible D: though she's currently promised to the youngest Shiranui x.x not much better. (Shiranui Kyou's younger brother who was with Ayame's crazy brother and narrowly escaped death XD) I think I have a problem with the way I word things x.x

Thanks for the review, desirae668 :D she broke her sword so the only place she can go is back to Agano. Not to mention she still has to become the leader XD

**Thank you very much for the review, Arcee-chan :D every review brings me closer to the magical one hundred mark X3 my cat is a

purebred ragdoll so she has Siamese like markings, though her base is white. I love her to death :3 she meows a lot though x.x**

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 29: Bones that become steel.

We left after eating breakfast the morning after the Northern Oni paid us a visit. I was still astonished by how accepting Chikage's family was of my crime and affliction.

Emi had asked if it was a curse and I had to consider that for a moment. It felt like a curse to me but the fact remained that my ancestor had willingly accepted the Beni-hime. Rather, she had gone looking for the Hime in order to gain power.

I wondered if I would have been born weak if not for the Hime's influence. Either way, I was stuck with her and that was that.

* * *

><p>Agano was too far to make in one day, especially considering the state of paths and roads, and we ended up staying in Kyoto's Gion district again. We even checked in at the exact same inn.<p>

Night had just begun to set in and once again there was a buzz in the air. I was ready to chop it up to spring fever but Chikage interrupted, no doubt reading my curious gaze.

"The cherry blossoms bloom in another week or so. Are you familiar with flower viewing parties?"

I nodded. "I didn't realize the sakura bloom so early here. We normally don't see them till the beginning of May, sometimes later depending on the lingering winter."

"Gion is particularly fond of this time of year. It is a great time to make money," he shrugged and leaned against the railing.

A couple maiko were practicing a dance. I wondered what Kimigiku would be doing if she was still working as a geisha here.

"What do you do for cherry blossom viewing? I suppose you just use it as an excuse to drink,"

I had to grin. "There aren't many cherry trees near our shrine so I usually crash Kouta's party. We actually had a drinking party under the same tree where I found you about a week earlier,"

A small smile grazed his lips in response and he pushed off the railing, going back into _our _room. He had insisted we share one room this time, since it saved money. I couldn't object since he was paying.

I hadn't really cared last time since I figured he wouldn't consider doing anything, though I wasn't so sure this time around. He really was like a cat sometimes, doing as he pleased whenever.

It was getting late and I followed him inside. He wouldn't have a chance to try anything if I fell asleep quickly. Then again, if he really wanted to bug me he'd just wake me up.

He caught my shoulders as I tried to spread my futon out, massaging them roughly.

"Chikage?"

"Are your shoulders stiff? You were carrying most of the bones,"

I thought it was nice of him to be concerned, though he of all people knew I was tougher than that. He was probably scheming something. He was never deliberately thoughtful like this.

I slouched out of his hold and continued to roll out my futon. "You know what? I am tired after skipping all day long with a bunch of bones slung over my shoulders."

He didn't take the hint, or maybe just ignored it. He wrapped his arms around my stomach, trying to haul me away from my means of escape.

"Chikage!" I protested, trying to peel his hands away from my sides. If I squirmed too much he'd know he was tickling me, if he didn't already. "I honestly just want to go to bed,"

He sighed, his breath on the back of my neck drawing a shiver from me. He grudgingly let go and I kicked the rest of the bedding out flat before he could change his mind and harass me some more.

I plopped down, curling into the cold sheets. It'd be even colder if I was still living up North.

Chikage followed my example, only he neglected the futon he'd already setup for himself.

"What are you doing?" I cautiously asked.

He snorted. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

I rolled away, blanket pulled up to my neck. I had to draw the line at some point. I wouldn't get a wink of sleep if he was breathing down my back the whole night.

"Uh-uh."

"What?" he complained. "We'll eventually marry anyways, it's not like merely sleeping on the same cot will matter."

"You do realize you'll have to change your name, considering I'll be higher up than you, right?" that was a nice distraction for him.

He frowned at me. "Why not just add Kazama to your growing list of names?"

"It's not a growing list!" I kicked the blankets away, intent on trying to beat him to a pulp.

He chuckled at my halfhearted attempt, catching my fist. A human

probably wouldn't have found it so easy but he made it seem like he was casually holding my hand, which was exactly what it turned into.

Chikage pulled me into his lap, gently forcing my clenched fingers apart. He ran his thumb over my palm, inciting faint tingles from the remaining scar tissue from the acidic burn.

I thought he might have wanted to comment on the mark. He hadn't even scolded me for my recklessness yesterday; he was generally pretty quick with his words too.

"I didn't get to see what Oka-san did to your hair,"

I tilted my head just slightly, giving him a quizzical look. He carefully pulled the ribbon from my hair, sweeping his hand through it to unwind it from the stiff bun. I'd actually forgotten how to do it the quick way, thanks to his perfectionist mother.

He smirked, estimating the length. "If she had cut off anymore you wouldn't qualify for becoming the leader of Agano.

"Don't remind me," it'd took all my persuasive abilities (they weren't that impressive) to convince Ami-san to keep it unusually long. She wanted to chop it off to a more 'sensible' length.

I rested my cheek against his chest. I really was tired. It was also extremely nice to have someone softly running their fingers through my hair.

He leaned forwards, grabbing the blankets off the floor and wrapping them around my shoulders.

"We leave as soon as the sun rises tomorrow, unless you'd rather skip breakfast and lunch."

I forgave him for the taunt; the quirky turn of his lips was too charming to resist. I relaxed back into the plump futon, fluffing up the feather pillow. Chikage stayed seated, half on, half off.

A quiet minute passed and I huffed. He'd stay there all night if he had to, though I suspected he was just waiting for me to fall asleep. We both knew that I slept like a rock.

I hesitantly lifted the covers, wordlessly giving him permission. It wasn't like I didn't trust him. I just seriously thought it'd be difficult to sleep with someone, anyone, so close to me.

He immediately snuggled into me, the contented rumble from his chest not unlike a cat's purring. I wriggled and the purr turned into a growl.

"No wiggling,"

"Whose bed do you think this is?" I indignantly retorted.

"You're already stealing the blankets," he accused.

I had barely moved. "Go back to your own bed if you don't like it,"

He hugged me tighter instead, fixing the blanket so that it spread evenly over both of us. I could feel his heartbeat between my shoulders and hoped he couldn't feel the same from me.

"Good? Now stay still,"

I forgot that he was a light sleeper. He'd probably have twice as much trouble falling asleep as I did. He'd be the one not getting a wink of sleep if I tossed and turned.

"Goodnight," I managed.

Chikage brushed his lips across the top of my head, murmuring 'sleep well' to me. I thought it was impossible, what with my heart thrumming erratically.

* * *

><p>I guessed falling asleep really wasn't that hard for me, morning came almost too quickly and then Chikage was shaking me awake. He wanted to be up and ready in the next ten minutes.<p>

I wouldn't mind being in Agano by noon. It'd be a nice change of pace after spending my stay at Chikage's place stepping on needles half the time.

The time melted away as we made our way across the countryside, watching the hills and forests grow greener and greener as we moved south. I thought it was amazing how the temperatures could differ so greatly between the North and the South of Japan.

Soon, the grand cliff face of the looming mountain behind the village of Agano could be seen on the cloudy horizon. The air was heavy and the smell of rain permeated the air. I prayed that the rain would hold off until we made it to Agano.

We headed up to Kuri's forge right away. The sooner I could replace my demon blade the better. Chikage also wanted to see if she'd give the Douji-giri back early.

"Kuri-san!" I called from the doorway. The familiar sound of pounding metal echoed through the back hallway as I made my way to the backroom. Chikage was carrying the material for me, though he wrinkled his nose at a long arm bone that was sticking up.

She worked so hard. It seemed like she was always in the forge. Was there really that much work to be done? I wondered if she'd have to work even harder now that I had the bones for a new demon blade ready.

"You're finally back? I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever be," she stopped beating a thick spearhead and took the time to appraise the bones. "Put 'em over here,"

Chikage dropped them on the wooden table, glad to be rid of them. Kuri glared at him, unimpressed by his lack of concern for the bones.

I wanted to ask her how long it'd take but didn't want to sound

impatient. I wasn't even paying, not really.

She must have noticed something was off about me and sidled up to me. She squinted at me with her crow's eyes and finally drew her conclusion.

"The Imperial Chrysanthemum is quiet,"

I nodded. "I had to deal with it, it was simply too malevolent for anyone to use."

She let a long breath out, tinged with regret. "It was a wondrous sword, but you're right. I suppose you'll be putting it in storage? Or do you want me to break it down and dump the remainders down the river?"

"No," I said quickly. "That's fine. I'd rather not destroy Father's legacy,"

Kuri understood the worth of a sword as a gift better than anyone else did.

"Alright. I'll have your new blade ready sometime during May. Stick around until then, it's less than two months away." She turned on her heel and opened up a cabinet, taking out a couple swords. One was the Douji-giri and she tossed it to Chikage. "What do you think of it?"

He unsheathed it half ways, studying the reignited purple glow. "It's a bit different," he observed.

Kuri scoffed. "I would have been disappointed if you hadn't noticed. I increased the amount of divine silver to make up for what had been lost to erosion over the years. That, combined with new tamahagane, has definitely made the blade livelier."

"I see," he sheathed it and was about to slip it back into place on his belt before looking to her for confirmation.

"I'll hold onto it for a while later. I'm sure Ayame will kick that jerk's ass soon enough," she measured the other blades next to me, picking the one she thought best suited me without waiting for my opinion. "I think you've even gotten taller,"

"Really?" I hadn't realized.

She cackled. "No, though you've definitely gotten fatter,"

Chikage chuckled as well. "That's what you get for eating everything Oka-san put in front of you,"

I self-consciously glanced down at my stomach, seeing no difference. They were just making fun of me now. I was sure third and fourth helpings couldn't really affect me that much.

"Anyways," I cleared my throat, cutting through their snickering. "I'm sure Ichi-ji is waiting for us to turn up. We'll leave you to your work, Kuri-san,"

She waved me off. "Just call me Kuri,"

I smiled. I really loved the people here.

It rained that afternoon and we were stuck inside at my uncle's. He was helping to take care of a son of the Nakamura family so we had the whole house to ourselves. I wanted to go over and help too, though he insisted there was nothing I could do. The young man would probably be dead by nightfall.

I sighed for what might have been the hundredth time. Chikage's irritated puff certainly made it sound like it.

"Are you still moaning on about that sword?"

I had been disappointed by the sword's emptiness. Regular katana just didn't compare to demon blades.

"No, it's the man who's dying,"

"Then go and see if you can help," he made it sound so simple.

"This is a village that is well acquainted with death. They know when wounds are fatal and understand the limits of their own knowledge. I might be well versed in medicine but I don't have the same experience as they do."

He scooted over, sitting behind me, arms about my waist. "You did a pretty good job with me,"

I settled against his chest, accepting the comforting embrace. "I think it'd be nice if Oni weren't the only beings that had such extraordinary healing abilities,"

He didn't comment, though I knew he had an equally incredible amount of pride as an Oni.

I diverted my attention, preferring not to dwell on death. I'd set that straight when I became leader. I wouldn't recklessly send my fellow villagers to their deaths on dangerous request like Sakurano Ryuusuke did.

"So, your birthday is in May, right? What would you like?"

"A marriage,"

I elbowed him. "When things work out," I promised.

He grumbled unintelligibly. Besides, it'd be strange to get married on the same day as his birthday.

"What about your birthday present? I haven't seen you wearing it," he rebuked.

I screwed up my nose. It was technically a present from his whole family, though Chiaki told me Chikage picked it out and bought it himself. Emi had begged him to buy something she picked out as well and Chiharu eventually came up with the idea of having the gift be from the whole family. Chikage hadn't been happy with that, according to his oldest brother.

"But it's gilded with real gold!" I whined. I'd never had anything made from gold before. "What if I break it or lose it or something?"

"It's a hair ornament; it's not a big deal if you break it as long as you get a couple uses out of it."

I twisted in his arms but he deftly locked me there, chin on my head. He really loved to do that.

"Anyways, when is your birthday?"

He let my hair down. "It doesn't matter; you don't need to get me anything."

"At least tell me when your birthday is," I challenged.

"The last day of May," he relented.

"Hnn? I'll have to find you something amazing then,"

"Anything is fine."

"You're ruining my fun."

* * *

><p>About two weeks had passed since I had returned to Agano and I quickly discovered that there wasn't a whole lot to do. I mostly helped Ichirou-jiji with whatever chores he had; otherwise Chikage tormented me to relieve his own boredom.<p>

We sparred a few times but the weather had turned rainy and Jiji didn't appreciate us fighting inside the house. Almost any one room was big enough, he was just too strict.

So Chikage passed his time by harassing me. I usually didn't mind, but if I got too comfortable he was liable to randomly tickle me and didn't stop until I was practically crying. He probably did it to keep me from falling asleep.

We weren't sharing a room now. Jiji would never have allowed it anyways. He was annoyed enough when he caught us 'idly sitting about with goo-goo eyes'.

I found myself keeping busy by spending time with Hashimoto Satomi. I was astounded by the amount of people who wanted and already had tattoos. It made me feel more secure about mine and I even considered getting another one.

Going at a human pace was a bit frustrating though. With Oni, and even other youkai, it was possible to do all the stages of a tattoo at once. I could only do the outline and some of the color with most my customers.

I'd only been doing it for three and half days and I had seen most every guy in the village between the age of fifteen and fifty.

I was mostly ruthless while inking their weak skin. A lot of them made doubtful comments about me, whether about my tattooing method or

my ability to become their leader.

Currently I was working on the shoulder of Maki Rikuto, a boy a couple years younger and also a descendant of an Oni. He didn't heal nearly as quickly as I did but I'd still be able to finish it in one afternoon. That's if he would stop turning his head to see the progress.

I pushed his head into the pillow for the second time.

"You can look at it when it's finished,"

His reply was muffled and I rolled my eyes. He was too hyper.

"It looks awesome, Nee-sama!"

I liked it fine enough. It was only an ashy swirl of smoke, though it curled around his upper arm like a snake. I thought he was going to faint when I started on his inner arm where the skin was the most sensitive.

He was handling it really well right at the moment though. A good thing too, Chikage had just arrived, no doubt to distract me some more. My hideout and hobby could hardly be kept a secret in a place as small as this.

Chikage barged in, startling poor Rikuto. The mile long grin straightened out a bit.

"Good afternoon," I greeted.

His eyes narrowed just slightly. Goose bumps rose on Rikuto's stick thin arms. He was taller than me but thinner than a straw dummy.

"So this is what you've been up to,"

"Uh-m," it felt like a life time since I'd done that. Ami-san hated it, though Emi occasionally got away with it.

"Haven't added anymore to your collection, have you?"

"Nope,"

Chikage knelt next to me and Rikuto stiffened. He probably felt intimidated by Chikage's pureblood pride. Chikage definitely had an air about him that made everyone else feel inferior. I was subject to the feeling sometimes.

He was eyeing my bare arms and any other glimpse of bare skin he could find, searching for a telltale sign of another tattoo. How rude, he didn't trust me.

He slipped a finger down the back of my collar and I swung at him, red faced.

"So help me, I'll jab you with the ink needle."

He backed off, somewhat.

I concentrated on Rikuto, carefully adding detail with light and dark shades of grey. His cheerful mood had plummeted thanks to Chikage's presence.

"H-hey, you can always finish it another day, right?"

"Yeah, give me a second to finish this part," then I'd tell Chikage off for making my customer nervous.

I worked for a couple minutes more, blending the color in and checking for any missed spots. As soon as I put the needle down Rikuto was up and scrambling to fix his haori.

"See you later, Nee-sama," and he was out the door before I could even tell him when to come back.

I set to cleaning up the needle and returning the unused ink.

"You scared my customer away," I began. "I could have finished that in another hour or so, and then you had to come in and scare the poor boy away."

He ignored me, probably waiting for me to put the needle away. Coward.

"So, this is your idea of a 'break' from me?"

Satomi-san had probably quoted me when I said that. Awful woman, she just loved to light fires between people.

"It's nice to do my own thing," I defended.

He grunted. "Lecherous woman,"

I balked. "What did you just call me?"

"You're here staring at half naked men all day,"

"So what?" I bristled. "It'd be the same if I was helping with the injured but Jiji keeps turning me away,"

He glowered at the wall and the sound of rushing blood in my ears drowned out the rain pelting on the roof for a moment. His lips moved but I was so angry at that everything else seemed to be drowned out. How could he call me a 'lecherous woman' when I'd been completely devoted to him since day one? He was the only man I'd ever be interested in.

"What?" I asked, having slightly cooled off.

"For my birthday, I want a tattoo."

I raised my eyebrows, wondering if I'd heard that right. It was ridiculous, Chikage hated tattoos.

He read my skeptical expression and gruffly added, "I'm not saying it again,"

I wanted to hear him say it again. I wanted to tease him about it and have him beg or even try to weasel his way out of it.

"What type of tattoo do you want?" I prompted.

He went from resolute to exasperated in a blink. "I don't know, you pick,"

I reached up and touched my fingertips to his neck, drawing a comical shiver from him. "Are you sure? Your skin is so smooth and flawless,"

He squished me in a hug and I peered up at his face, swearing I saw the barest tint of rouge in his complexion.

I laughed. "You're blushing!"

He disregarded my accusation and bent down, capturing my lips. It was soft, as usual, but got heavier until I could barely stay standing . . . as usual. He pressed his hand into the small of my back, which was all that kept me from swooning.

I felt a ghost of a smirk and escaped from the kiss before my brain turned to mush on me. He nipped at my neck and I was glad that a hickey only lasted a couple minutes on my neck.

Someone cleared their throat and I jumped, Chikage wasn't paying any attention to whoever it was.

"Are you done for today, Ayame-chan?" Satomi-san inquired, sweet as sugar.

"Uh-m, Rikuto just left,"

"Alright then; go on home and keep Kazama-san company,"

She was too suggestive for a mother of three younger children. She was, no doubt, raising a bunch of perverts.

Chikage practically dragged me away, enjoying having me chained to his side again. He was too clingy sometimes.

Not that I could stay mad at him, not for very long.

* * *

><p>I had to fit in a couple fluffy moments but the next chapter should be pretty action packed.

Again, April 25, Chapter 30: Steel Flower

Please review!

31. Steel Flower

Please review! I love you all forever :D I think I'm really crazy XD I tried explaining Hanashobu to a friend at school and they called me hyper and twisted T^T

**You were quick on the draw to review, desirae668 :D glad the chapter was good. It was supposed to be continued from that point but

it was jumping all over the place and the next part boosted it up into the 6000 word range and there was still more after that. Halving the chapter was easier than rushing to have it ready for today x.x
98*****th***** review!**

Thanks for the review, Whimsicott! Nice to hear that you love the story :D as you can see, it's just regular action. 99***th***** review! **

My cat tried to kill a bird today (the 19***th*****) and she was just plucking its feathers out Q.Q I shoed her away and checked on the poor little thing. It was still alive and kept opening and closing its beak but it didn't make a sound TT_TT one of its legs was hanging off and the other wouldn't let go of the grass so I pulled the grass out to pick it up. It had scrapes from her claws and the feathers around its neck had been plucked off, leaving its skin red and raw. I asked my dad to kill it for me.**

And the 100***th***** review goes to silentxangel! Thank you very much! On the pets topic :D my Ragdoll is named Sasha (I call her Sash since I hate the name), she was a thousand dollars when my aunt's friend bought her as a kitten but they ended up giving her to us for free. She's almost three now and full grown (freakin' huge) and has the bluest eyes I've ever seen on anything. She loves to cuddle, have her belly rubbed, and normally sleeps on the foot of my bed. Sometimes she sleeps in the closet :T wish she wouldn't. She walks on a leash and everything :D I'm mad at her for injuring (which led to killing) the little bird though Q.Q I have another cat and she's really fat. She doesn't like Sash but Sash is always trying to lie down next to her, so it's kind of sad :(**

I'm super happy I satisfied you with the fluffy awesomeness :D I can't really get you a prize for being the 100***th***** reviewer though D: will words of gratitude and promises of more fluffy moments suffice :D? You've been my loyal reviewer for so long now, I could never thank you enough ^^ and you know there has to be more fluffiness to come before the story ends ;D thanks again!**

Review 101 goes to EverRose808! You were close to the magical 100 as well :) Thanks for the review! There's something in Japanese tattooing called 'hidden tattoos' (can't remember the actual word for it x.x) or something like that and is small words or phrases hidden among the tattoo. I can see Ayame doing something like that as well XD

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 30: Steel Flower.

The whole month of April slipped away, sometime between me being occupied with Chikage, my part-time job as a tattoo artist, Ichi-ji's lessons (he wanted me to be prepared to become the leader _before_ I actually became the leader), and babysitting.

Satomi-san said it was good experience, not that I planned on having kids anytime soon. Chikage probably had other ideas but he could wait. He'd already waited all this time.

May would disappear just as quickly if I wasn't careful. I still had no idea what kind of tattoo I should give Chikage. His complexion was a hard one to work with. He wasn't pale or tan; it was a very natural skin tone that belonged to someone who could neither burn nor look sickly white.

I thought he'd probably prefer something nondescript, something simple and probably earthy. I wanted to try something striking, though he'd never let me. If I had it my way I'd have a tiger on his mid back and shoulder, maybe wading through clear blue water with pale white water lilies and tall reeds.

Yeah, he'd never let me do something that heavy.

As I suspected, the weather grew warmer still; May was half over. Kuri even passed a message onto Rikuto-kun. My sword was finally finished.

I was kind of nervous as I climbed the steep hill to the forge. How had it turned out? Was the combination of spirits from the bones good? Had I really picked out the best quality material? I just had to trust in Kuri's ability.

The forge was actually quiet; even the sultry air had mostly cleared out. It was unusual for Kuri to take breaks

"Kuri?" I called.

"I'm in the back," she beckoned. She could hear me for once, now that there wasn't a constant clanging of metal and roaring from the fire.

I made my way down the familiar hallway, butterflies in my stomach. I jokingly wondered if they had crawled from my legs to my stomach. It was silly, bordering on stupid, for me to worry about the sword.

"You sure took your time," Kuri commented sassily. She was tying the grip quickly and expertly. She'd already decided on dark green with a feminine pink underneath. The sheath was lacquered black with indents of flower petals, the petals glazed with pink paint of some sort.

"It's very . . . decorated," I observed.

"Chikage said you liked fancy things," she paused, pulling the stiff cord as tight as she could. "Is it too much? I myself never saw you as much of a girly-girl, what with your tattoos and casual clothes."

I shook my head. I loved it, though it didn't look much like a typical sword used for combat. "It looks great,"

"Wait until you see the blade,"

After she said that it seemed like it took longer for her to completely wrap the hilt. I preoccupied myself with the rounded hilt guard. It was gold washed with a garden of flowers imprinted around it. Very intricate, especially for something so small.

She passed it to me when she was done, expectantly waiting for me to draw it.

I ran my hand across the smooth surface of the sheathe, forcing the hilt to click away with my thumb. I drew it with a flourish, admiring its even weight.

It was quiet and I feared that the spirits had weakened. After a moment there was a slow thrumming as the souls of the sword prodded at my control, testing me as their new wielder.

The steel became a subdued pink and I pondered the special features that the sword might be harboring.

"So?" Kuri prompted.

I studied the blade for a long minute. "I love it. The Imperial Chrysanthemum had a kind of 'do it my way or don't do it at all,' feel to it. This one is really . . . docile? Curious even,"

"Yup, tamest demon blade I've ever forged. Not that its weak, you'll find that out soon enough,"

"Uh-m,"

"So, I suppose Kazama is eager to get the Douji-giri Yasutsuna back?"

He was, kind of. He wasn't pushing me to fulfill my promise to Kuri though. He wanted me to be sure I could beat Sakurano before I tried.

Sakurano's skills were mostly unknown. He usually had tonfas attached to his belt by leather cords, as well as a katana and even nunchaku. I'd heard he'd spent a lot of his youth in the Southern Japanese islands. It certainly showed.

"He's looking forward to getting the Douji-giri back but wants to train some more first, to give me time to adjust to my new demon blade."

Kuri waved that idea off. "How hard is it to swing a sword? Just challenge him at your earliest convenience; he's not getting any rustier."

That was true; he was still in his prime.

"I suppose I'll try it out for a bit first. Doesn't make sense to get used to its special abilities when they won't even work with the charmed necklace,"

Kuri agreed with that. "Take your time getting used to it after you become the leader. You won't have to worry about much for a while. I'm sure that old fart of an uncle will help you out at first." She paused, thoughtfully. "Too bad you couldn't get a hold of the subjugating necklace beforehand. It might startle you when you're reduced to no more than a human,"

I was pretty sure I'd be more than a little startled by that. Not having my usual strength would definitely be strange and

frightening.

"Don't let him kill you. Surrender if you're fatally injured, taking the necklace off will probably save your life."

That was encouraging. Jiji had already mentioned that the duels definitely weren't safe, even if we'd both be fighting at our most basic strength. It was completely within reason for him to kill me if he couldn't force me to give up, and vice versa.

I wouldn't kill him. There were still people here who loved him, like his family. He had four kids, the youngest just a couple years old.

"Anyways, little flower," Kuri drawled, patting my shoulder. "Good luck, and take care of that blade."

* * *

><p>I was on my way back from testing my sword when I ran into Sakurano Ryuusuke.<p>

I hadn't discovered the mysterious pink blade's powers, only tried the wicked edge Kuri had expertly sharpened.

Maybe its abilities were passive, like Chikage's Douji-giri. His was more dangerous to demons, especially Oni, thanks to the divine silver.

"Good evening, Oni girl."

I nodded back. "Good evening, Sakurano-dono," he wasn't the most pleasant person. He was a bit rude and prejudice to pureblooded demons. I thought he was also a hypocrite since the Sakurano were descended from the Yukiona, just like the Agano.

I turned after passing him, watching his dark waist length black hair twist in the wind.

"Sakurano Ryuusuke," I blurted out.

He stopped and looked back, blankly, vacantly. "Yes?"

"I'm challenging you to a duel for the right to lead the Agano,"

A small smile curled his usual somber lips. He might once have been a handsome man but there was an obvious harshness about him now.

"You are a foolish youngster; your blood makes you conceited. You will not live longer than I, according to your rash behavior."

He was irritating me right from the start. I could see this would be a pleasant exchange. This was practically the first time I had even spoken to him and I hadn't even done anything unreasonable to him, yet.

"Your mother was the same way, always insisting she was equal to any man here. No doubt she believed her Oni blood made her more capable than regular humans."

I grit my teeth. Was he egging me on? Did he want me to be riled up before the fight to make me less careful?

"I had hoped that Oni man would keep you in your place but he is obviously a lazy bastard looking for easy power. He must be planning to use you to control Agano without lifting a finger himself,"

I was seriously mad now. There were no words to properly describe how much he had just ticked me off. Chikage could be accused of many things, but using people wasn't one of them.

Osen had tried to tell me he was just using me to continue his line and gain power within his family but I hadn't believed it when she'd told me and I definitely didn't believe it after staying at his home for several months.

Sure, he didn't exactly see eye to eye with his oldest brother but he wasn't trying to usurp his position. Chikage seemed to like being confined to a small place even less than I did, though he still wasn't the most ideal travel partner.

"Sakurano Ryuusuke," I repeated, straining to keep my composure. "I formally request a duel to prove my worthiness to the villagers."

He turned his nose up to me, grey-blue eyes glaring down on me. "Very well,"

I expected that we'd have to return to the Sakurano residence to retrieve the binding necklace but he already had the set with him. He tossed one of the two at me, slipping the other on quickly and fixing his hair over it.

He had anticipated me coming to challenge him, sooner rather than later. He seemed to have been bored waiting for me.

"You there, boy,"

A kid who looked barely more than twelve had been walking up the path, skirting around the two of us with two big buckets of water. He froze at Sakurano's call and looked over stiffly.

"Yes?" he timidly answered.

"Witness the match between us. You are free to go once your elders arrive to see for themselves."

He reluctantly bowed. He probably just wanted to deliver the buckets so he could do something more entertaining before the sun disappeared and his mother called him in for bed. This wasn't what he had in mind.

"Confirm that your hair is three shaku," Sakurano demanded.

I let my hair down. It no longer almost touched the ground but still fell past my hips, gathering around the backs of my knees.

He inclined his chin and I ducked into the necklace, immediately feeling my body become heavier. I didn't feel weaker, just that the spring in my step had diminished.

Sakurano surged forwards without any further declarations and I reacted almost too late. It'd take me a moment to get used to my speed, until then I had better move my butt the second he tensed.

I drew my katana after retreating a few paces and clashed with him directly afterwards. Neither swords glowed but both were still clearly demon blades. They were unresponsive thanks to the subduing spell on the necklaces.

His was called the Morning Glory and I'd heard it drank its opponents blood and grew stronger based on the quality. Essentially, it'd be more useful against someone like me who was a purebred demon. Not something I'd like to test.

He forced me back and I found that I was more used to being pushed back than I realized. Chikage always overpowered me so I was used to being in the 'losing' role.

I deflected his next advance and came dangerously close to taking his eye out. Chikage would never have given me the chance to swing wide like that. That was the advantage of regular speed and reaction time. I was thinking faster than he was.

There were no rules this time, which suited me fine. 'Forced surrender' was the goal, though I doubted Sakurano would stop anywhere short of putting me in my grave.

I imagined his stormy eyes were just as chaotic as the Beni-hime's. Something seemed ready to snap under the surface.

I received the first mark. It was shallow across the top of my shoulder. If I hadn't been backing up at the same time I would have had the same on my throat.

A few people had gathered but they were mostly quiet. The setting sun was between us. I'd hate to be the one facing it; getting my back to it would be nice.

I must have angled myself towards that, or maybe he'd had the same idea for himself. Either way, I was about to be put in a hard spot.

All or nothing, I chanted in my mind. I dodged into his guard, catching his well aimed slash with the tip of my blade.

I was breathing hard and my heart was thumping painfully in my chest. That was a close call.

He attempted to drive me back with his weight, which was what I wanted. Chikage and Ichi-ji had advised me on using the transfer of weight to get myself out of trouble.

When he was at the pinnacle of the motion I sidestepped, ducking under his swinging blade.

I was face to face with the sun, back to back with Sakurano. Whoever turned first would have the upper hand now.

I spun; the blade in my hand weightless. I didn't care if I injured

him at this point. There was no time to consider it.

The blade caught him across the chest and sliced him to the bone. I hadn't had enough power in the half spin to split his bones, which was a good thing.

I didn't expect him to retaliate so soon. In fact, I had been hoping he wouldn't at all.

The cut was swift and I smelt the blood before I felt the pain. He'd delved the sword into my shoulder, yanking it out with a rough twist.

I wanted to throw up. My left hand dropped off the hilt, immobilized. I was left with my weakened right arm.

"Give up, little Oni?"

It was only my shoulder but I could already feel myself floating dangerously towards unconsciousness. I shook myself; he was just as winded as I was. I could still turn this around.

My gaze dropped at the sound of delicate pitter-patter. Small grey beads rolled at my feet.

I didn't hear the collective gasp from the audience, though I knew it happened. He raised the Morning Glory, edge glowing a wicked blue.

With the dark sky behind him and his eyes glinting as evilly as his sword I wasn't surprised by his nickname, Kyuuketsuki. He was going to kill me.

Fear.

Regret.

A maelstrom of other emotions and an odd sense of calm.

He was going to kill me and no one here would be able to question it.

Chikage would but he wouldn't be able to go against the entire village if Sakurano ordered it. Chikage was much stronger than any of them by themselves but I couldn't say they didn't pose a threat to him.

He was going to kill me and Chikage would hurt himself, maybe even die, trying to avenge me.

The blood drinking blade was inching closer and closer to me. Time was partially suspended and I had to make one last decisive move before the blood loss pushed me over the edge.

"You picked a thistle in a patch of clover,"

I dove forwards, not caring that the blade bit into my shoulder. It was surprisingly blunt anyways. On the other hand, my new partner glided along his arm like it was ribbon. I ended at his hand, lopping his index finger off.

He dropped his sword and held his fist to his chest, blood pumping out from the stump in spurts.

"Give up?" I panted.

I felt a hand on each of my shoulders and the twins pushed past me. Ameko was livid and I figured Tsukiko was as well, despite her face being unaltered.

"It's clear who won, little flower," Tsukiko retorted. "He broke his oath as the honorable leader of the Agano. We will not follow him,"

There was a cheer from the crowd, or rather the whole village.

Ameko kicked Sakurano's sword away from him before he could grab for it. He wouldn't have been able to do much anyways; he was just as dizzy as I was.

"Tell us," Ameko growled. "Which one of us is the demon today, Sakurano-_sama_"

He paled but glared back defiantly. He probably couldn't stand being talked down to by the Tsubaki twins. There was no response given to them, just his hateful gaze.

I perked up when I heard the sound of bells. Tsukiko had bells on her red haori but she wasn't moving.

The necklace must have also limited my perception on youki. There was an intense wind radiating from the serious sister and it could only be of demonic origin. Sakurano finally bowed his head as Tsukiko's human form morphed.

A giant monster cat seemed to pounce right out of her skin, a split tail waving behind it. It hissed at him before swiping its spectral paw through him. I was expecting him to be squashed but it went through him like mist.

The bakeneko, or Tsukiko, sat on her haunches and swished her tail. As I looked around her large form ghostly white chains burst from Sakurano's chest, binding him. They didn't appear to hurt though he still sat hunched over, forced to listen to the humiliating jabs from the gathered families.

The man who led the Yamamoto stepped out of the crowd, approaching with an unreadable expression on his face.

"You are tired, dear old friend." He drew a tanto and gathered Sakurano's hair. "It pains me to do this, Ryuusuke."

He didn't raise his head, not for his people or for his friend. Yamamoto Sousuke (if I remembered his name correctly) chopped his hair off without another word.

Long hair in Agano stood for many things. Responsibility, dedication, and shared bonds; all of which had just been taken from him. I felt a pang of guilt. I was partially at fault for sending him over the top.

Yamamoto nodded to me and gestured for a few of his men to come with a stretcher. They were taking Sakurano to their barracks to confine and, hopefully, treat his injuries.

The exhaustion hit me then and I couldn't even feel my wounds anymore. I rocked back on my heels, intent on plopping down on the ground.

I was caught and steadied, still slumping against their chest. I glanced back, capturing Chikage's subtly worried frown. His expression was both annoyed and impressed.

He practically ripped the beaded necklace off, barely minding my hair that almost got caught in it.

"The hell?"

"I don't like it," he rebuked.

I hadn't had the sense to take it off myself but felt my vitality beginning to flow back. It was welcome despite the return of the sharp pain from the slashes as they knit themselves back together.

"Why?"

He looked away. "It's usually quite easy to tell where you are but it suddenly felt like you were nowhere."

It wasn't that he couldn't sense things; it just seemed that he didn't notice it unless it concerned him. He was very selective about what he observed.

The people began to disperse, throwing curious glances at me, their new leader. No one seemed eager to approach me with Chikage fawning over me. That was nice; I didn't really have the energy to carry on much of a conversation.

Tsukiko's form wavered and she reformed as a human again. Ameko was about to approach us, probably to give me a thump on the shoulder, but Tsukiko grabbed her sister by the back of her haori. Ameko protested but let Tsukiko lead her away.

"I came to investigate and found you fighting Sakurano." He paused to check my wounds, gently appraising the stab wound on my shoulder. "You were too impatient; you should have waited and trained a bit more."

I shrugged and he ruffled my bangs and then scooped me up, intent on bringing me back to my uncle's place. Jiji's bones had been hurting him recently so he hadn't come to see the commotion. He'd probably complain about having to bandage me up as well.

"What do you plan on calling it?"

I cradled the sword, careful not to cut either one of us accidentally. It was back to shining pink again.

"Steel Flower,"

He scoffed. "That's creative,"

* * *

><p>May 2, Chapter 31: In a name.

Thank you everyone!

32. In a name

Please review :)

I'm sorry I didn't deliver, desirae668. Every chapter is more rushed than I want it to be but it allows me to keep going without hiatus, which I'm very prone to with my original works. Being able to write constantly is a first for me and I've been happier than ever. You aren't being mean when you pointed out it was rushed, it's just the truth. I can sugarcoat it and say I haven't been feeling well or something equally false but, obviously, that isn't the way I swing.

**The fact that the last chapter was anticlimactic just proves that I'm an inexperienced writer. I'm at the very end of the rope and frankly I know the ending is going to be very, very, disappointing for some. **

There are nineteen days from today (26**th****) to May 14****th**** and it's entirely possible that I will not be able to finish by then. The last chapters were supposed to be in the 5000 word range each but after reviewing my notes it looks like it'll be a bit longer unless I cut some stuff out or add another chapter. _Originally_ it was supposed to end May 23****rd**** but I tried to be cool and have it end on the five month mark exactly. I can see that was a mistake now and I'll be paying for it with the compromised ending. If I have the stomach for it I'll edit it afterwards and future readers won't have to raise their eyebrows at the many plot holes and inconsistencies, which doesn't really apply to you guys. **

**I might be on the verge of ranting so I'll stop here. There's just no one to listen to my insecurities in person who understands and it's really frustrating. **

So thank you for the review and your consideration :D

Thanks for the review, Arkaos :D I'm glad you like it so far. Thanks for taking the time to review :)

Thanks for the review, silentxangel! My strength definitely isn't in fight scenes. I feel like I've been getting worse rather than better x.x I tried to justify the no victory dance with the fact that she was injured badly enough to need medical attention but it just shows I had no clue where I was trying to lead it XD my finals start in June so I'm trying to conclude Hanashobu in the early half of May but it doesn't seem to be working x.x good luck and thanks for the support and suggestions :D

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 31: In a name.

I lounged next to Ayame, absently reading the Agano family tree on the wall across from me. Ayame was writing out another long contract.

It seemed like that's all she'd been doing since she beat Sakurano. They didn't even give her time to recover from the wound he'd inflicted on her shoulder.

I thought Ayame would have found it frustrating but she did the work without complaint. She couldn't afford to procrastinate now that the entire village was her responsibility.

She was the youngest leader of the Agano and the first girl to be at the very head. Hashimoto Satomi and Yamaguchi Kuri were leaders as well but only within their families.

"What are you writing now?" it was about time for her to take a break.

"Um," she laid down her brush. "There's a village east of here that requires assistance in getting rid of a nekomata. At least that's what it sounds like,"

"How do you plan on dealing with it?" I inquired.
"Extermination?"

She shook her head. "Nekomata aren't difficult to deal with. It's angry for whatever reason and is making people ill. If we can pacify it their fortune will be reversed,"

"Cats make great guardians," I remarked.

"Uh-m," she went back to the paper, wetting her brush with the pitch black ink again.

"Who are you sending?"

"Maki Rikuto" "

"Tattoo boy?" he was pretty young to be sent out.

"Maki Rikuto, Yamaguchi Hanaki, and Nishimura Kagerou. Hanaki is Kuri's younger sister and a good leader. Kagerou is a bit shy but he has good instincts, if anyone can communicate with the nekomata it'd be him. And Rikuto might look thin but he's incredibly brawny, he can take care of any surprises," she summarized.

Ayame was putting a lot of thought into it, which was her job. I peeked over her shoulder, reading her neat and delicate handwriting.

I noticed she was wearing her yukata loosely again, probably because she wasn't being hounded by anyone at the moment.

"Your writing is very neat," I complimented. Her collar was

especially loose around her shoulders and I curiously hovered, wondering if the tattoo was just beneath it.

She was indifferent. "Nah, I just have a steady hand."

"I suppose that helps with tattooing," I still almost cringed whenever I had to say it.

"Your birthday is the day after tomorrow, right?"

I nodded but she was too engrossed in her writing to see. "Will you have time?" I asked. I wouldn't wish work on her but I still thought it'd be nice if it could be postponed, preferably for a long while.

"I'll make time,"

I rolled on my back and stared at the ceiling. She was determined to mark me up with ink.

"What do you have planned?"

"May I tattoo your back and shoulder?" she innocently requested.

"How much of it?" I really wanted something small if I had to be subjected to it at all.

She held her left hand up, visualizing my back as she swept it along the air. I wouldn't mind if she had asked to see my back but I figured she already had it memorized from her frequent gawking while I was injured by Hakuouki.

"Three or four of my hands," she estimated.

Her hands were pretty small but it still felt like a lot. She sounded hopeful and obviously had something in mind. Ayame put her writing utensil down and turned her begging eyes on me. I sighed and she continued.

"A tiger and a bit of a background,"

"A tiger?" I repeated incredulously. What was it with her and cats? I admitted a tiger was an upgrade from a regular housecat but didn't feel comforted.

"Tiger's are manly," she defended.

I had to laugh. Did she think I was manly (I was) or was she teasing me? "That's not the problem,"

She frowned. "You don't think I could ink a tiger?"

"Have you tried before?"

"No, that's the point. Something unique to you,"

I wondered if I should feel flattered or worried. I must have looked as apprehensive as I felt. She lay across my chest, begging me to let her in a whiny voice.

"Only if you let me see your back,"

She gaped at me and sat up slowly. "After I've done yours,"

I smirked. "Yours first,"

"How about I just tell you what it is?" she compromised.

"I might have been satisfied had you told me when I first asked. However, I won't be satisfied unless I see it with my own eyes now. I've been wondering for too long," I taunted her.

Ayame twisted her arm around and felt her mid back, feeling for the tattoo. Was she debating letting me see already?

Either way, I jumped at the opportunity and held her hand flat against her spine. She tried to swat me away, daring me to grab her other hand.

"I'm too busy," she complained as I pulled her into my arms. She would wear herself out in the first month if she kept going like this.

I nuzzled the crook of her neck, earning a giggle. It was nice to know she hadn't become a complete workaholic. She relaxed and pushed her papers away with one foot, humoring me with her attention.

"I thought you were busy?" I joked.

"I'm stiff from being hunched over all day. Rub my shoulders for me?"

She didn't seem to mind whichever way I massaged her shoulders. I assumed she was just happy to be resting her hand. The light satin material practically slipped off her shoulders (without any help from me) and Ayame elbowed me in the abdomen.

"Pervert," she admonished.

"Woman," I growled. "You're the one who ties the robe. It's not my fault," I was keeping her from fixing it though.

"Let go!" she hissed. "I'm not wearing anything under this,"

"I know," I chuckled.

She yanked the fabric from my grip and fixed it with a huff. Her cheeks were a pinched pink. She made to return to her work and I imprisoned her with a tight embrace.

My breath on the side of her neck was enough to tickle her and she squirmed uncomfortably. I nipped her ear and grinned as she practically jumped out of her skin. I'd never get tired of her jerky responses.

"It's getting late," I commented. I knew she wanted to finish her paperwork before turning in. I planted a kiss beneath her ear, silently laughing at the shiver she couldn't hide. "Don't stay up too late,"

* * *

><p>I was an early riser, though I wished I weren't sometimes. There wasn't anything for me to do and I figured sleeping in would at least burn away some of my spare time.<p>

Maybe I should have been trying to find some kind of work. Martial arts were about the only thing I could offer though and I was pretty sure everyone already had their own teachers and preferred styles.

I wasn't interested in teaching any snot nosed brats how to read and write either. Ayame spent a couple hours in the afternoon teaching Satomi's kids and whoever else turned up.

I was considering breaking into her uncle's library when I heard the start of a commotion.

A couple kids were scrambling up the hill towards Kuri's, probably looking for Ayame. Too bad she was at the Kawaguchi residence settling some dispute between them and the Nakamura. Both were prominent farmers in Agano and if they didn't do well everyone was in for a hungry winter.

I pseudo teleported to the source, surprising tattoo boy. He inched away, still glaring at the intruder, nostrils flared.

Another man was cradling his arm, his wrist a swollen mess of purple and blue. He stubbornly refused to let the other man pass.

The outsider was an Oni, one of unfamiliar coloring. His bright orange hair and dark maroon eyes were the strangest combination I had ever witnessed.

He sighted me and turned to address me, no longer caring about the sputtering crowd around him.

"Finally, someone who will listen," he announced, intentionally trying to draw a rise from the people. He was really pushing his luck.

"That depends," I countered. "I will not listen to someone who makes unreasonable demands,"

He seemed bewildered. "Surely you would listen to your own brethren over these cowardly Halflings?"

There was an outraged whisper. The people of Agano were the last people I'd call cowards. Every one of them looked like they wanted to whack him one. I'm sure they would have already tied him up if the man with the broken wrist wasn't cautioning them discretely.

"I see no cowards, just one idiot."

The villagers had appeared torn, wondering how I would react to this visitor and how they should go about it if I welcomed him. They liked Ayame fine enough but I was still an outsider to them.

I might have earned a bit of respect just then by insulting him. They appreciated the angry red flush that I brought to his wide forehead

and there were a few giggles from the younger members who had come to watch.

Had I not met Ayame my opinion would have been the same as his. I hadn't realized I had even begun to accept the way of the Agano people until now as I was readily defending them.

"Tell me, what are you here for?"

His hand had begun to wander, seeking out his sword. At my words he let his arm rest against his side again.

"I heard there was a female Oni here who fought for her own hand,"

There were subtle grins pulling at the corners of a few lips.

"Rumors sown by the Wakehisa grow fast," I observed. "She doesn't actually fight for her own hand. That was a onetime deal to put Wakehisa Wakahiro in his place,"

His patience was running out. "Is she your woman?"

I doubted he would walk away even if I said yes. He looked like the type who tried to take what he could when he could.

"She belongs to the village," she'd never exclusively be mine.

"She is of no value to this village," he argued.

That stung somewhere in the back of my mind. I had said something similar to Chizuru and Hakuouki. Ayame would have felt disheartened by such a careless quip.

"Her value isn't something you can measure without understanding her,"

There was a hoot from one of the immature village boys and I rolled my eyes. I wouldn't say something like that if I didn't want Ayame to hear it.

"I'm flattered," she responded. "Why's everyone crowding our guest?"

I was impressed by her strong voice, filled with an authority that cut through the buzz. Everyone took a step back, trusting Ayame's presence.

She was wearing black hakama today and a red haori with a winding white design from the collar down the sleeves.

The bastard must have liked what he saw and bowed mockingly.

"Forgive my rudeness. I am Morihara Rintaka and I've come to ask for your hand in marriage,"

"No thanks,"

He wasn't deterred by her flat out rejection. He might have been waiting for it even.

"Will you accept my challenge then?"

She didn't wait for him to elaborate. "No thanks,"

His eyebrows practically disappeared into his hairline. "Hear me out, little lady,"

She didn't appreciate the retort and crossed her arms.

"Ayame-sama doesn't have time to deal with two suitors!" Maki called. He conveniently disappeared behind the broad back of a bulky middle aged man. I would have knocked some sense into his empty head if he was near enough.

He ignored the boy and spoke up once more. "Fight me as an Oni, my lady. Surely you have nothing to fear if you are as strong as the rumors suggest,"

Ayame was easily goaded but she was showing a bit of restraint in her indifferent expression. She might just have been tired.

She was still the leader though. He was basically being a pest and it was her duty to deal with him. All the same, this 'challenge' fell into my court.

"She's a busy woman,"

Her nose twitched and the Oni called Morihara glared at me. He was too cocky for his own good. He didn't care who I was and ignorantly believed himself to be unmatched. He was a genuine bumpkin.

"Have a fair fight with me instead," I wasn't fazed by the whistle from (probably) Rikuto. I did, however, wish they'd back off a bit. If push came to shove a group of spectators would just be a nuisance.

"Heh!" he snorted. "I suppose it's only natural that I fight the guy who had his eyes on her first,"

Ayame shook her head. "Rikuto-kun, lend him your katana,"

He begrudgingly began to slide his sword from his belt and I waved him off. "Don't worry," I wouldn't have to draw the Douji-giri against someone like him.

"Something wrong with that pompous sword at your hip?" Morihara jeered. He unsheathed his own without any concern over my weaponless form.

Some of the villagers dispersed, though most just backed up a little more. Those who stayed were probably interested in seeing how Oni fought against each other. Those who left probably didn't want to see any bloodshed.

I wasn't going to intentionally harm him. I couldn't seriously harm him as long as I didn't draw the Douji-giri. I wasn't into brutally beating idiots.

Ayame shrugged and skipped to the edge of the circle of bystanders.

"No hard feelings, Blondie,"

He charged forwards and I half disregarded him. Was he actually insulting my hair color when his was the color of a peeled carrot? I hated carrots. It didn't matter how you prepared them, cooked or raw.

I had to ponder if he was intentionally being slow. I easily stepped around his first swing and even caught the back of his collar, throwing him off his feet.

He rolled and was on his feet again, running straight for me again. There wasn't anything wrong with his teachings, just the way he was employing them. I swept his next attack away with the back of my hand on the flat side of his blade.

This was little more than child's play for me. If it were Ayame she'd probably break his sword on the next slash. Then again, with his crudeness he might have snapped it on the first exchange.

"Is that all you've got?" I sneered. "Your master must be weeping,"

He let a flustered puff escape and faced me head on again. I hauled back and busted his lip, maybe even loosened a tooth.

"How old are you?" I questioned, "Why are you in such a rush to find a wife?"

It must have been irritating for him, being unable to keep up with someone who could casually speak while pushing him back.

"Twenty-three," he stubbornly answered. He was trying his damnest to keep up. "There aren't exactly that many unmarried female Oni around,"

I refrained from cackling aloud. He must have been the eldest. The first born was always the dumbest. Thanks to that the younger siblings didn't have to worry about making stupid mistakes. I was pretty sure Chiaki had already taken center stage for foolish remarks and clumsy decisions.

"What the hell are you smirking about?" he shouted.

He surprised me with his quick step and I was forced to use the Douji-giri as a shield. I managed to click it open in time to protect the red scabbard. Kuri hadn't replaced that as it was the one thing that made it the Kazama's treasure. I technically wasn't supposed to be using it in the first place but Chiaki had given it to me when he inherited it and told me to do whatever with it.

The blade glowed a menacing dark purple and he jumped back, instinctively knowing to stay away from it. He didn't recognize it as the Douji-giri Yasutsuna but I suppose that was no surprise.

I readjusted it and waited for him to bolt at me again.

"Scared?"

He barely heard the jibe, studying my sword instead. Had he finally realized he was fighting an impossible opponent? He hadn't even bothered to unleash his true form. He was probably too proud to show it if I didn't.

He was more cautious this time but that didn't help him any. His hesitation made it seem as though he were treading through water and it was too easy to land a kick straight to his chest.

He sprawled in the dust and took a hand from his hilt to feel his ribs. I grew board of the farce and hovered over him, one foot on his wrist.

"Give up. You must realize how pathetically one sided this is?"

"Asshole!" he spat and tried to knock me off balance. He was still winded and it was simply resisted. I put all my weight on his wrist and felt it snap. He wouldn't be much of a threat to anyone but I figured it was best to put him at an even lesser advantage.

I kicked his sword away and crouched next to him. "Listen up, greenhorn; the stronger man always gets what he wants."

He refused to look at me but stayed down. I could see him trembling slightly from the pain.

I stood. "My win," I called to Ayame. "What was the prize again?"

She blatantly evaded my question and punished Rikuto for whistling, again. "Rikuto-kun, why don't you help Morihara-san up?"

He stalked forwards, head low, and hauled Morihara up roughly by his good arm. He certainly was stronger than his gangly limbs suggested. There was much grumbling from both of them but the orange haired Oni apparently had enough respect and commonsense to not resist. He'd be sent on his way as soon as someone splinted his wrist.

The rest of the crowd broke apart, a few nodding in my direction.

"You didn't have to do that,"

I felt the corners of my lips turning down. "What? Break his wrist? He would have gotten up again if I hadn't and then I just would have had to break something else,"

She sighed. "That's not what I meant. It would have been simpler if I had just told him I already intended to . . . intended to marry someone else,"

The light smile returned. "He still would have tried to fight. That's how young Oni are," I gathered her into my arms, stroking her long and sleek pony tail. "That's how men are,"

* * *

><p>I really am starting to feel stressed by this T^T I just want to finish it and take a really long nap afterwards. I drew this chapter really close so I didn't really edit it. If you see any mistakes that bug you please point them out and I'll fix them when I get a chance. I can't even remember why this chapter was supposed to be called "In a name." x.x I should have changed it but I couldn't think of anything. Then again, my chapter titles rarely make sense XD

May 9**th****, Chapter 32: Kurosawa Oni.**

It'll be in Kazama's POV again since I gave Ayame two chapters in a row. This chapter was also short.

I have no idea how many chapters it'll actually be now since I'm trying to cut out some crap that's just taking up room and sucking energy out of the ending. If you decide to review, I wouldn't mind some helpful suggestions for what you don't want to be left from the ending. If you remember any unanswered questions inquire about them so I don't forget. Heck, if you just want to chat I'll hand my email out to anybody XD

33. Kurosawa Oni

Thank you, everyone! I know I haven't been doing my best recently so I'm really glad most everyone is still reading :D sorry if I scared you away last chapter x.x

Just thought I'd throw this in XD "Get a tattoo," she said. "It'll be great," she said.

**Thank you for the positive feedback, Arkaos :D a writer will always find fault in their own writing. If they didn't they'd never get better. All the same, I haven't checked this chapter as much as I normally would XD I think I'm just being lazy now that the end is near. **

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Chapter 32: Kurosawa Oni.

True to her word, she found time on my birthday to prick me full of ink. I walked into her room that morning hoping she'd be swamped with work but found her preparing various colors of the heavy tattoo ink.

She had me before I could casually turn in the other direction, tugging me towards the futon and pillows set up for my comfort.

I briefly wondered who my mother would scold first, Ayame or me?

"I get to see your tattoo first," I reminded.

She huffed. "You asked for a tattoo before you asked to see mine,

remember?"

"It's my birthday," it should have been completely my choice.

"I know," she sighed. "I'll let you see it if it's really bothering you that much, but afterwards. I'll mess up if I'm embarrassed,"

"What's there to be embarrassed about?" it was just a tattoo and her back. I'd already seen most of her legs and chest thanks to her carelessness.

She organized the ink around her and gestured for me to loosen my kimono.

"It's personally significant to me,"

I slipped my arms from the sleeves and propped a fat cushion up for my elbows. Being sentimental really didn't suit her.

She primed the needle and I sank a little more into the futon. I still didn't understand her fascination with tattoos and doubted I ever would.

"Any idea how long this will take?"

"A couple hours,"

It'd probably be the longest couple of hours in my life.

* * *

><p>"Woman!"<p>

"Stop your moaning,"

I rumbled angrily and refrained from scratching. She was only doing 'touch ups' now but I swore she was just intentionally being rough. I said as much.

"You're tensing up too much,"

How could I not when it burned, itched, tingled, and stung? Apparently the ink usually produced a numbing affect after a while but of course Oni were immune to that.

"Honestly, I'm just about finished," she consoled. She switched inks again and I cracked my toes impatiently.

"Don't even think about running away after your finish,"

"Why would I be thinking about running away?" she innocently replied.

She obviously knew I was going to inflict some sort of discomfort on her. It didn't help that she was extremely ticklish and had promised to let me see her tattoo.

Ayame laid the needle down but I didn't get my hopes up. She was just appraising her handy work.

"Done."

I perked up, glad to be wrong, and twisted my arm back to feel the tattoo. New, it felt almost velvety and the slight pain was quickly fading away.

Ayame had borrowed a long mirror from Satomi and passed me a handled mirror with an iris petal print. I sat up and rolled my shoulders stiffly.

She fidgeted as she waited for my opinion of the tattoo. I held the mirror up and tweaked it until I could fully see the tattoo.

I usually pictured tigers as snarling beasts from the mainland but this one appeared calm enough, considering it was wading through water. I had to admit it was pretty amazing. The tiger's fur shimmered with beads of water and its golden eyes were just slightly downcast at the lotus in front of it.

There was a koi fish swimming close to the surface near its flank and I grinned.

"I have a feeling that koi fish wasn't in your first plan,"

She smiled back. "I had to, you kept asking about koi when I got the one on my back,"

I returned the mirror to her. For a second I thought she must be hoarding all sorts of junk in her room again but remembered I was in her room. She'd apparently gotten over her packrat tendencies.

"Don't forget your end of the deal,"

"Don't be so impatient, perv,"

She pushed away her inking supplies and sat on her knees, pulling the collar of her sakura printed yukata loose. I duly noted that she'd bound her chest with bleached cotton bandages.

"A bit of the lower half is ruined," she paused, gathering her words. "When I stopped the tree during the avalanche it dug pretty deeply into that part of my back."

"Satomi can't fix it?"

She shook her head and reluctantly let the fabric bunch around her waist, a pleasant flush about her cheeks. She tucked a couple loose strands into her bun and turned her back to me.

"I told you it wasn't a fish,"

It really wasn't but that hardly surprised me at this point. I'd initially thought it had been and that she'd been denying but gave up after a while.

I almost mistook the scaly serpent for a snake until I noticed the three-toed claws securing it around its perch.

"Is that supposed to be the dragon from your father's sword?"

"It's more like tribute to him. I have no idea what he actually looked like before he became so distorted,"

I shrugged and leaned closer, trying to decide who was more skilled, Satomi or Ayame. I decided they were about equal with their own styles. Satomi's was a little more traditional.

The dragon had earthy brown scales on its back that paled on its underside. It was wrapped around a huge sugi tree like a sacred rope, a living yorishiro. One of its gnarly paws was reaching away from the picture, though it was clearly the damaged part. It almost looked like a ripple in water.

I blinked. In the bark and the leaves of the tree were the faintest impressions of various demons.

"You're not even using the Imperial Chrysanthemum anymore," I remarked.

"I still think it's my responsibility to honor and remember the demons used to forge my father's sword. It'd be ignorant of me to forget that some were good and some were bad, that some were simple minded and others as cognitive as you or I,"

I exhaled a long breath and hugged her shoulders, resting my chin on her head. She was being too thoughtful.

"Say, C-Chikage?"

"Hm?" I mumbled, absently cataloging the scent of her hair. It was somewhat floral, probably her own blend.

"You love me, right?"

I startled. Did she even need to ask? I'd made it perfectly clear that I wanted to marry her and that she was important to me in various ways. I was about to scold for having to ask when I realized I'd yet to say it aloud.

"Of course I love you, Seaweed Head," I hoped that didn't make it sound insincere to her. She'd probably appreciate my humor.

She giggled. Somehow a weight had been lifted from hearing something she already knew.

"I love you too,"

I didn't need to be reassured of something obvious though I did feel my chest swell, contented by such a small phrase. I hadn't been so at peace in such a long time. Years of empty existence had been washed away and I truly felt as though I was living in the moment.

At that thought a kind of soberness took over and I became aware of a disquieting sense of foreboding. Things never went this smoothly in love, especially when I added Ayame's general bad luck to the equation.

The peace here wouldn't last for much longer. She couldn't even last

more than a few months at my harmless residence before managing to get herself killed practically.

"Promise me that you're mine," I demanded.

She didn't catch my sudden anxiety and probably thought I was just being overly possessive. I was prepared for her to feel annoyed over it (she was too proud sometimes) but she seemed to enjoy the attention.

"I belong to you just as much as you belong to me,"

I chuckled. "I've been yours since you saved my life,"

Ayame blushed but didn't doubt my words. She knew by now that my fascination with her had begun from the time I laid eyes on her messy slept-in appearance. It might not have been love at first but it had definitely grown into it.

She curled into my arms. "I think I'll take a break today,"

* * *

><p>June began with warm showers that knocked any remaining spring blossoms down. Hardy sun loving summer flowers were beginning to bloom instead, painting Agano luridly red in the dreary weather.<p>

I considered asking Ayame to accompany me on a visit to my family. Emi would be upset all over again if I missed her birthday twice. Ayame was too busy planning commissions though. A sector of the government wanted to hire three competent assassins but Ayame was reluctant.

It was as her sister had said. It'd take more than a little hard work to wipe three hundred years of blood stained history away.

There was a break in the cloud cover and the blue sky peeked down at me. I had nothing better to do other than sit on the deck and loiter. If Ichirou saw me he'd put me to work doing something or another.

From the Agano's family home I could see most of the village and the long stretch of grassy, marshy, land that ended at the trees that obscured the horizon some leagues away.

I lazily lid down, my arm my only pillow. It'd be nice if Ayame finished her work early. Until then a nap would suffice.

Five minutes passed and I felt myself on the verge of sleep, only to pry my eyelids open on a whim. Nothing was amiss, at first glance. I scanned the trees again and picked up subtle movement.

It was unusual to see any kind of movement in the isolated area outside Agano and I supported myself on my elbow, squinting a bit.

The movement ceased suddenly and I paled. There was a flicker in the open land and several more followed after it. I could think of only one thing that moved so fast; Oni.

I jumped up and almost ran into Ayame's uncle.

"So you noticed too, younglin'?" he reflected. "If that Ayame thinks she can convince the village to run like her father did she has another thing coming to her. We won't watch two of our beloved leaders die at the hands of those greedy Kurosawa bastards."

I assumed he'd be fighting if he had to.

"Go on; find out where our young leader is," he dismissed me with a wave of his boney hand. "She must have already noticed them as well,"

I pseudo teleported through the village, impressed by how prepared everyone was in a matter of minutes. I spotted Ayame at the front entrance, waiting with a couple others to see if the Kurosawa Oni and their comrades would approach them head on.

"What's your plan?" I questioned. We'd likely be outmatched.

"We're surrounded. The only thing we can do is hold our own and pray that we've been grossly underestimated,"

A few of the enemies began to show themselves, stopping outside the gate but clearly anticipating a fight. It appeared someone had something to say. That someone was probably her brother.

He appeared a moment later, his black hair pulled into a low ponytail.

"Little sister, your accomplishments never cease to amaze me. Leader of a petty group of ill-bred mercenaries? Is that all you aspire to do with your life?" his yellow eyes twinkled, daring her to lose her cool.

"I see you haven't changed, you're still a maniac," she retorted. He was still an unsettling creep but she wasn't swayed by his sharp words anymore. There was nothing he could say to her that would shake her resolve.

The grin left his lips but his confidence was untouched. "Why don't you just hand yourself over? No one has to die, either by our hands or yours when the Rakshasi takes control,"

I guessed he was talking about the Beni-hime.

She bristled. "The hell? You think I'd just agree if you asked nicely or stimulated my imagination with thoughts of the Beni-hime going berserk?"

"I'm only stating the truth. What makes you think she won't drive you mad? Are you so special that she'll spare you when she drove every other host mad?"

"How kind of you to remind me, Nii-sama," she giped. "It's alright though, the Hime and I get along fine," that was an exaggeration though partly true. She knew more about the Hime than her predecessors. Maybe she could convince the Beni-hime to do things her way.

He sensed that he wasn't gaining any ground and switched targets.

"I see they're staying this time around," he snorted and spat on the ground. "You must be more important to them than your 'father' was!"

That visibly struck a nerve and he wasted no time in giving his signal to the rest of the Oni. They charged together but those who could fight on our side had been watching and waiting for it. We drew our swords in uniform.

The Agano mercenaries that he held in such contempt might even have had more experience than his group of young Oni.

The first one to run at me lay on the ground the next second, bleeding out quickly from a wound that he expected to heal in a matter of minutes. I even thought it had been shallow but the revamped Douji-giri had a stronger effect on Oni now.

After a quick scan of the Oni I concluded that Shirannui's younger brother, my sister's fianc  , wasn't present. That was good. I would have felt guilty if he died here. He probably had ceased dealings with this shady bunch.

Still, there were fifty or sixty hard headed Oni. There was that many in Agano counting the children and elderly. Such numbers would quickly overwhelm us if we weren't watchful.

Many of the fighters in Agano were well versed in group tactics, compensating for each other's weaknesses. A few had strength that matched an average Oni as well.

Ayame's abilities weren't to be forgotten either. She was a deadly swordswoman even without the Imperial Chrysanthemum's destructive capabilities. I suspected she also had even more control over the Beni-hime since the winter.

She stood face to face with her half-brother, his personal guard ready to attack the second he ordered them too.

"I'll protect my village," Ayame promised. "Even if it means killing every last one of you,"

She would if she had to and no one would blame her if she did.

Her brother glared back and turned, his men rushing in, white hair flashing.

Ayame had the same idea, psyching them out with her regular Oni transformation before allowing the Beni-hime's nature to surface afterwards. I could see it in her face, she wanted to protect everyone. Maybe it was that strong desire that gave her such control over the Beni-hime. Her eyes were a strong and pure yellow, like twin suns.

The six brawny Oni he had set aside for his sister were immediately taken aback, fearing for their lives. Her expression did not soften as they stepped back. I thought it was strange that her brother, a higher up of the Kurosawa, allowed such a reaction from his men.

She flashed forwards, taking the first out with a diagonal slash. As she did her flaming red hair faded back to white and she danced back before the remaining five could seize her.

"So that was your plan?" Hinata had warned her that he could probably seal the Beni-hime's power just as his father had been able to. I thought it was ridiculous that the Hime could be sealed in the first place if she was supposed to be some sort of being on the same level as gods. He hadn't even done anything that I could see.

A few more Oni turned in our direction, seeing her sealed power as a chance to take her down. I stood between them, knowing Ayame was handling herself fine at the moment. I quickly dispatched those on my side of the line, feeling nothing over a couple Oni who had lost their pride and sided with such a power hungry villain.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ayame trade blows with the five remaining Oni, narrowly escaping being caught on both sides a couple times. Her brother unsheathed his regular katana, ready to step in.

I was preoccupied with the Oni who had come after me and the rest of Agano was fairing decently. Miraculously, no one had died on our side yet. I suppose we had been underestimated.

There was a strange high pitched whistling and I determined after a few seconds that it was coming from Ayame's glowing pink sword. I'd almost forgotten that she hadn't even discovered the Steel Flower's basic powers.

"You can prattle on as much as you want but you can't change the wind that sways the grass,"

She spun, the flourish of her blade rending the air. The Oni closest to her received a gash across his chest while the spiraling wind that hit the rest produced small cuts. It wasn't exactly powerful but it made her sword dance a lot more effective.

It succeeded in making them wary and they tried not to be in her direct path, which was difficult.

The yellow eyed Kurosawa Oni finally stepped in. One of the other Oni walked straight into her range, distracting her from her half-brother. She wouldn't make it in time to deflect whatever he had in store for her.

Luckily, his back was to me. His lackeys didn't even have the chance to warn him before my blade was through his chest.

He choked, gurgling blood.

"Not allergic to silver, are you?" even if he had been Ayame's true brother immunity to silver wouldn't have saved him here. I wrenched the Douji-giri out. His control over the Beni-hime should have been loosening now that he was breathing his last breaths.

He tried to stay standing and took a crumpling step forward, being caught by one of his men who rushed forwards. I admitted they were pretty loyal to him.

Ayame's scream pierced the air. "Chikage!"

A familiar cold sensation ripped through my body and I peered down, staring disbelievingly at the blade that reached through the dead or dying Kurosawa Oni and through my chest.

The dark eyed Oni who'd appeared to be rescuing his leader had used him as a blind spot. He pushed the blade deeper and I smelt death as Ayame's brother's head lulled back.

The world spun and he mercilessly hauled the blade out. My legs could not support my weight anymore and I collapsed, tasting iron on my tongue.

Ayame's hair bled red and before I closed my eyes the three remaining Oni around her and the one who had stabbed me were felled like trees rooted in place.

* * *

><p>Please review! Hopefully next week's chapter is the last. I managed to cut a bit out :D

Chapter 33 on May 14**th****!**

34. Silver lining

Thanks for reading and reviewing up until now!

Thank you for the review, Arkaos. Glad you enjoyed it :)

Thanks for the review, desirae668! I'm relieved the last chapter was well done in your opinion. I didn't get many reviews for the last chapter so I was feeling a bit let down. I wasn't even trying to improve on the fight scene XD I was just trying to finish it :) really glad that you liked it!

* * *

><p>Hanashobu<p>

Final Chapter

Chapter 33: Silver lining.

I was aiming to kill. This was my village and my life and I wouldn't let my mother's past chase me out and take me back to some place I didn't belong. I wouldn't let it take the lives of my friends either.

The Steel Flower's ability was disappointing though still handy; it made them weary and gave me time to think. The moment they got close enough they'd be split by the blade of wind from the sword.

Suddenly, one of the men who had me surrounded threw himself at me. It was plainly apparent that he was just trying to take my attention

and I knew exactly who was leisurely approaching from behind.

I cut him from shoulder to navel, almost through and through. The blood that might have sprayed me was even blown in the other direction by the vicious gust that followed.

There was no chance for me to turn around, the men my brother had with him were too steadfast.

It didn't matter, as my half-brother couldn't advance more than a couple steps before he was stopped by Chikage. I hadn't forgotten that he was just a little ways away, keeping more Oni off my back.

I pushed one of the remaining Oni from my brother's group back and another slipped by, sword drawn as he pseudo teleported to his master's side.

I should have found it strange that someone as unstable as my brother would have loyal guards. Instead I watched without calling a warning to Chikage who saw the same thing I did; a man trying to save his fallen leader.

_You idiot! _the Beni-hime shouted, finally free of my brother's strange control. The fact that she had freed herself probably meant he was as dead as he'd ever be. Whatever he had used to subdue her must have been a silent incantation that depended solely on him.

There was only a split second to ponder that as I watched, horrified, as the dark blue haired Oni buried his sword to the hilt in his dead comrade.

Chikage couldn't have seen it coming and didn't have time to react before the blade was through his chest as well.

I screamed, though I wasn't entirely sure if it wasn't the Hime's doing. She was impulsively possessive of Chikage.

Cold numbness had rooted itself in my chest. My heart pounded and my legs unstuck themselves from the ground.

The first time I had laid eyes on Chikage came to mind. I remembered how the sakura petals had covered him like a shroud and the katana stuck in his torso, entirely out of place.

I'd saved him once but now he was in the exact same situation, dying all over again. Why couldn't I save anyone? It felt like the only thing I could do was kill and get the people I cared about killed.

The first one fell without me even noticing until the second turned to flee.

_Don't let them get away! _the Beni-hime screeched.

"Shut up," I replied aloud. I didn't plan on letting a single one of them live. They could try to escape. I'd hunt them all the ways back to their homes in the South if I had to.

I realized now they had been pretending to be afraid in order to get

me closer to my bastard half brother so that he could seal the Beni-hime. They thought there was nothing to fear if they could just seal her.

I didn't need her to get rid of scum like them. I didn't need her to become a scarlet demon. I didn't need her to be the scariest thing they had ever seen.

Hardly more than ten second passed and those remaining in my brother's group had perished, each with crude gaping wounds.

The neck of one was still attached by a thin flap of skin and I considered stopping to separate it. There were more left to dispatch first.

Somehow, I still had enough sense to not step between my villagers who were fighting winning battles. However, I didn't wait for those who were on the losing side to need to be saved either. I didn't care if they thought I made them look less than they were. They stepped out of my way, not wanting to get caught up in the turbulent wind.

It didn't seem like the Kurosawa Oni were even that much trouble, not when we'd quickly countered them and left them vulnerable. Just when I thought they were all dead I noticed Yamamoto Sousuke, always the merciful man, had several restrained.

I took the first step towards them and Kuri stepped in front of me, eyes solemn. I made to step around her and she grabbed my arm.

"Stop," she commanded.

"Let go of my arm, Kuri," I warned. Who was she to order me around?

"Take a look at that monstrosity you're wielding,"

I glared and yanked my arm from her firm grip.

She cursed. "I didn't craft such a fine blade so that you could tarnish it with malevolence!"

The word struck me hard and I looked at the blade. Its pink glow had darkened into a tainted crimson aura, just like the Imperial Chrysanthemum.

Most of the villagers were standing well away from me, not braving the burning wind that I had failed to notice. Kuri was used to miasmas so it hadn't dawned on me that even she might have found it hard to bear.

Maybe the corrosive gas from the Imperial Chrysanthemum had never been its ability. It was probably just the evil intent and I'd corrupted the Steel Flower, a one of a kind demon blade that wasn't inherently evil.

I swallowed my anger and the blade lightened just a little. I sheathed it and the Oni closest to me relaxed. I had been on the verge of slaying a man who was bound and unable to offer any

resistance.

Still, I felt so much rage bottled up in my chest. He bowed his head, his silent prayer answered. Before anybody could stop me I kicked him hard, definitely breaking a rib or two.

I felt no better, maybe even worse and the break in the dense clouds closed again, heavy droplets pelting down. I had every reason to cry but the tears just wouldn't come.

The villagers were already moving about and I felt useless. I was supposedly their leader but they operated just fine without me. Flexible woven straw mats had been taken out to cover the dead Oni.

Miraculously everyone on our side was still alive, unharmed for the most part. Except for Chikage.

I glanced back, expecting to see him already covered. Rikuto knelt over him; hand over his mouth and nose, checking for a breath.

From where I stood I barely noticed Rikuto's sudden jolt. "Kazama-sama?" he ripped his sleeve off with a jerk, tearing it into strips. "Nee-sama, he's still alive!"

I came out of my daze and was there in an instance, taking the strips Rikuto had torn up and tightly binding Chikage's chest. Rikuto's hand trembled slightly as he handed me the material, his face chalky. Blood quickly soaked through and I pressed my hand to the wound.

He was bleeding fast, too fast. I hadn't thought he'd even last long enough initially to be treated. Now there was no chance; every breath he took was shorter than the last.

I held his hand, cold and clammy but felt not even a twitch from Chikage. His red eyes opened for a moment and maybe he was aware of me. He didn't have the strength left to keep them open and they drifted shut for the last time.

_Our blood! _the Beni-hime exclaimed. _Give him our blood!_

My eyes stung. It was too much to ask for, one final hope. He was too far gone but if I didn't do something now there was no way I could live with myself. I figured I wouldn't be able to even then.

I bit my wrist; glad that the Beni-hime's transformation made my teeth grow into fangs. I placed my gored wrist on his parted lips, still pressing his wound together, blood leaking through and collecting in the diluted puddle of red rainwater.

More of my blood was running across his color drained cheeks than down his throat. The gouges from my teeth closed as well and I brought it back to my lips, biting as deeply as I could stand.

This time I drew the blood into my mouth quickly and leaned over him, delivering the bloody kiss. It was moderately more successful and I drew another mouthful.

He struggled to swallow and I didn't doubt that a fair amount went into his lungs instead. His responses were degrading still and my

shoulders shook from a suppressed sob. _It's too late, _echoed over and over again in my head.

Rikuto tore his other sleeve up and helped me add another layer to the makeshift bandage. No one else offered assistance, seeing nothing that they could do to aid us.

"Someone get a stretcher!" Rikuto called.

I debated to myself if moving him would be worse than leaving him in the thickening rain.

"A parasol first, please,"

Kuri was there almost immediately and I could barely look at her for fear of taking my eyes off of Chikage. She'd stopped me from becoming a complete monster earlier but I had no way of expressing my gratitude.

The twins were next with an outer wooden door and while Kuri held the umbrella open Rikuto helped me move Chikage off the ground and onto the platform. Tsukiko handed me proper bandages and I started on adding them to the scraps.

There was a weak sputter from Chikage and I handed the bandaging to Rikuto. He at least knew how to properly bandage someone.

No one questioned my giving blood to Chikage. They were familiar enough with the weight of demonic blood.

"Chikage?" I pleaded; my voice hoarse. I was close enough to feel his breath but didn't and hurriedly placed my ear to his chest. I could hear the rush of my own blood in my ears but didn't feel or hear the beat of his heart.

I sat up and felt his forehead, unnaturally cool.

"Chikage?" I choked. "Please . . . wake up!"

Rikuto shook his head and a powerless wail whistled by my lips. Ameko tried to pull me away to offer me an awkward, consoling, hug but I wasn't budging.

What had happened to his stupid ambition to marry me?

"Hey . . ."

I froze. A clumsy hand rested on my knee, cold even through the dark hakama I wore.

"You can't . . . get rid of me that easily,"

I blinked the hot tears away until my vision cleared just enough to confirm that Chikage's eyes were open, staring back with life to spare. There were dark sunken half circle under his eyes but that wasn't unexpected considering how much blood he had lost.

I crumpled, clutching his hand, and attempted to get my hiccoughs under control.

"Chikage, you dummy!"

* * *

><p>The day was crisp but not unpleasantly cold and a few clouds floated high in the blue sky. I was glad there wasn't too much work left to do and decided to take a break to stretch my legs and work the kinks out of my lower back.<p>

A few leaves had floated onto the deck, all in fall colors. The trees had mostly dropped their leaves, though a few remained vibrantly red, orange, and yellow.

I sighed. The party for the successful fall harvest was tonight but there was no point in me going. I could go; it just wouldn't be any fun.

Chikage turned the corner. He was wearing a kimono that faded from tan to white with white camellias breaking apart and dropping their petals. He hadn't bothered to cut his hair over the summer and now it was close to resting on his shoulders. I'd touched his bangs up for him a few times.

"You're wearing the hairpins again today?"

"Uh-m," the pins were dark lacquered wood with dangling golden butterflies on golden chains. Very rich looking. "I thought I'd wear something pretty," I didn't have to go running around the village today either. It'd be easier to find them if I lost them here.

Chikage took a seat behind me. "You should wear them every day. They look very good on you," he replied, lightly wrapping his arms around my stomach. "When's your sister coming to visit?"

I reclined into his embrace, enjoying the warmth on my back. "As soon as Takeshi-sama arranges for a suitable acting god,"

"I see," he balanced his chin on my head, blowing a flyaway strand away. "Oka-san wants us to visit before it's too difficult for you,"

I shrugged. "Apparently things calm down after the fall harvest. Hopefully we'll get a chance before the snow starts to fall thickly,"

"You don't have to push yourself; we can always wait until the baby is born,"

That seemed to be his favorite phrase now. It was occasionally annoying to hear him repeat it three or four times a day, sometimes more, but it was also nice to hear it as an excuse for him to keep me to himself. We both knew his mother and sister wouldn't leave me alone the entire time.

"I suppose," I agreed. "We'd just have to go again anyways,"

He chuckled and I felt the low rumble through my own chest. "Oka-san has a soft spot for children, she'll twist your arm and try her damnest to keep you and the baby for as long as she can."

I giggled. She didn't seem it since she was so strict. "I just wish she had more confidence in my ability to raise children," she and Emi had been sending letters almost every week now and Ami-san frequently stressed her wish for us to come and stay for awhile.

"She just wants her grandchildren to be familiar with Oni traditions," Chikage defended. He was, of course, of similar opinion.

I snorted. "She doesn't have to worry since she raised _you _well,"

Chikage smirked and kissed the side of my neck, something I was almost used to now. He placed his palm over the slight bump on my lower belly, breathing a contented breath.

"We have lots of time to think things through now. No interruptions, not for a long while,"

End
file.